



US010136692B2

(12) **United States Patent**  
**Ide et al.**

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 10,136,692 B2**  
(45) **Date of Patent:** **\*Nov. 27, 2018**

(54) **SPORTS HELMET**

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(\* ) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 939 days.  
This patent is subject to a terminal disclaimer.

(21) Appl. No.: **14/022,011**

(22) Filed: **Sep. 9, 2013**

(65) **Prior Publication Data**

US 2014/0007327 A1 Jan. 9, 2014

**Related U.S. Application Data**

(60) Continuation of application No. 13/153,197, filed on Jun. 3, 2011, now Pat. No. 8,528,118, which is a (Continued)

(51) **Int. Cl.**  
*A42B 3/12* (2006.01)  
*A42B 3/08* (2006.01)  
(Continued)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**  
CPC ..... *A42B 3/125* (2013.01); *A42B 3/00* (2013.01); *A42B 3/08* (2013.01); *A42B 3/12* (2013.01);  
(Continued)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**  
CPC .. A42B 3/125; A42B 3/08; A42B 3/12; A42B 3/122; A42B 3/16; A42B 3/18; A42B 3/20

See application file for complete search history.

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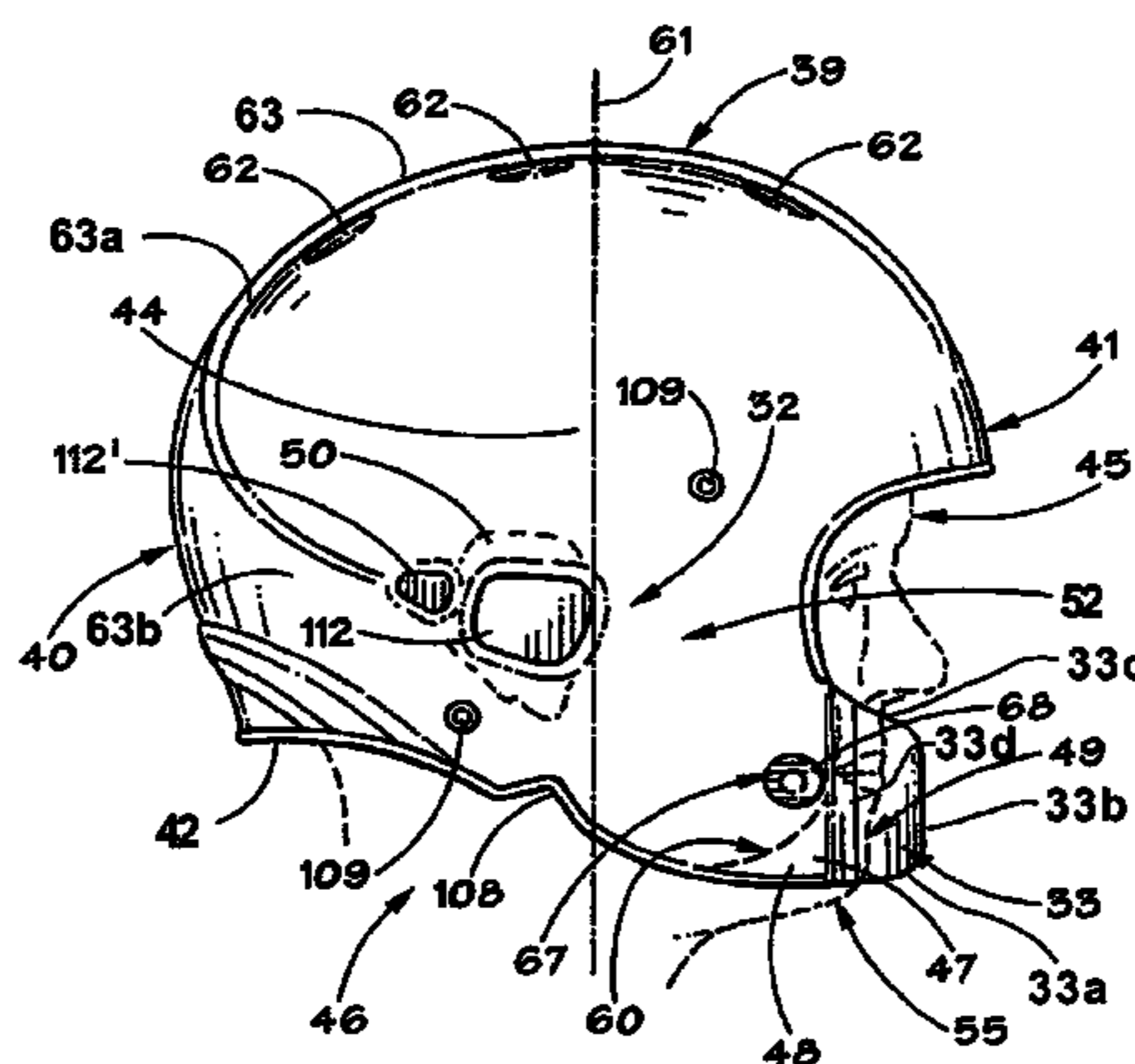
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

The present invention provides a protective sports helmet for a wearer engaged in a contact sport, such as football. The helmet includes a shell having a front region, a rear region, two side regions, and an ear flap depending from a side region. A jaw flap extends forwardly from each ear flap, wherein the jaw flap overlies an extent of a mandible of the wearer. The shell also includes a raised central band that extends from the front region across the crown to the rear region. The central band has lower side portions that extend from the rear region towards the side region of the shell and terminate proximate an ear opening in the shell. The central band has a width defined by a pair of opposed sidewalls that extend transversely from an outer surface of the shell. The shell also includes a first plurality of vent openings aligned along a first side of the raised central band and a second plurality of vent openings aligned along a second side of the band.

**43 Claims, 11 Drawing Sheets**



**Related U.S. Application Data**

continuation of application No. 11/653,078, filed on Jan. 10, 2007, now Pat. No. 7,954,177, which is a division of application No. 11/208,233, filed on Aug. 18, 2005, now Pat. No. 7,240,376, which is a continuation of application No. 10/427,236, filed on May 1, 2003, now Pat. No. 6,934,971.

(60) Provisional application No. 60/376,898, filed on May 1, 2002.

(51) **Int. Cl.**

*A42B 3/16* (2006.01)  
*A42B 3/18* (2006.01)  
*A42B 3/20* (2006.01)  
*A63B 71/10* (2006.01)  
*A42B 3/00* (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC ..... *A42B 3/122* (2013.01); *A42B 3/16* (2013.01); *A42B 3/18* (2013.01); *A42B 3/20* (2013.01); *A63B 71/10* (2013.01); *Y10T 24/44026* (2015.01); *Y10T 403/45* (2015.01); *Y10T 403/453* (2015.01); *Y10T 403/458* (2015.01); *Y10T 403/54* (2015.01); *Y10T 403/71* (2015.01); *Y10T 403/75* (2015.01)

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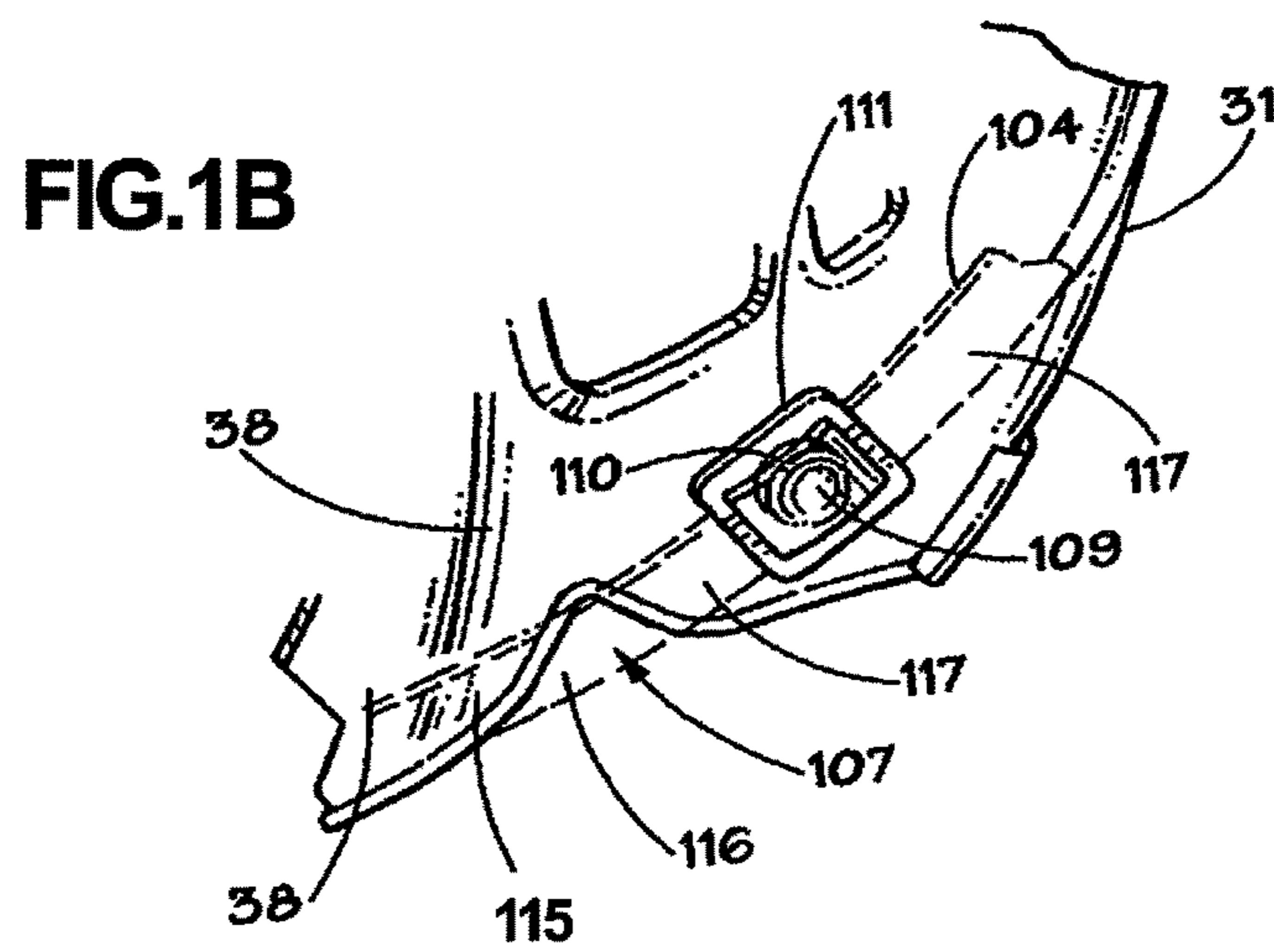
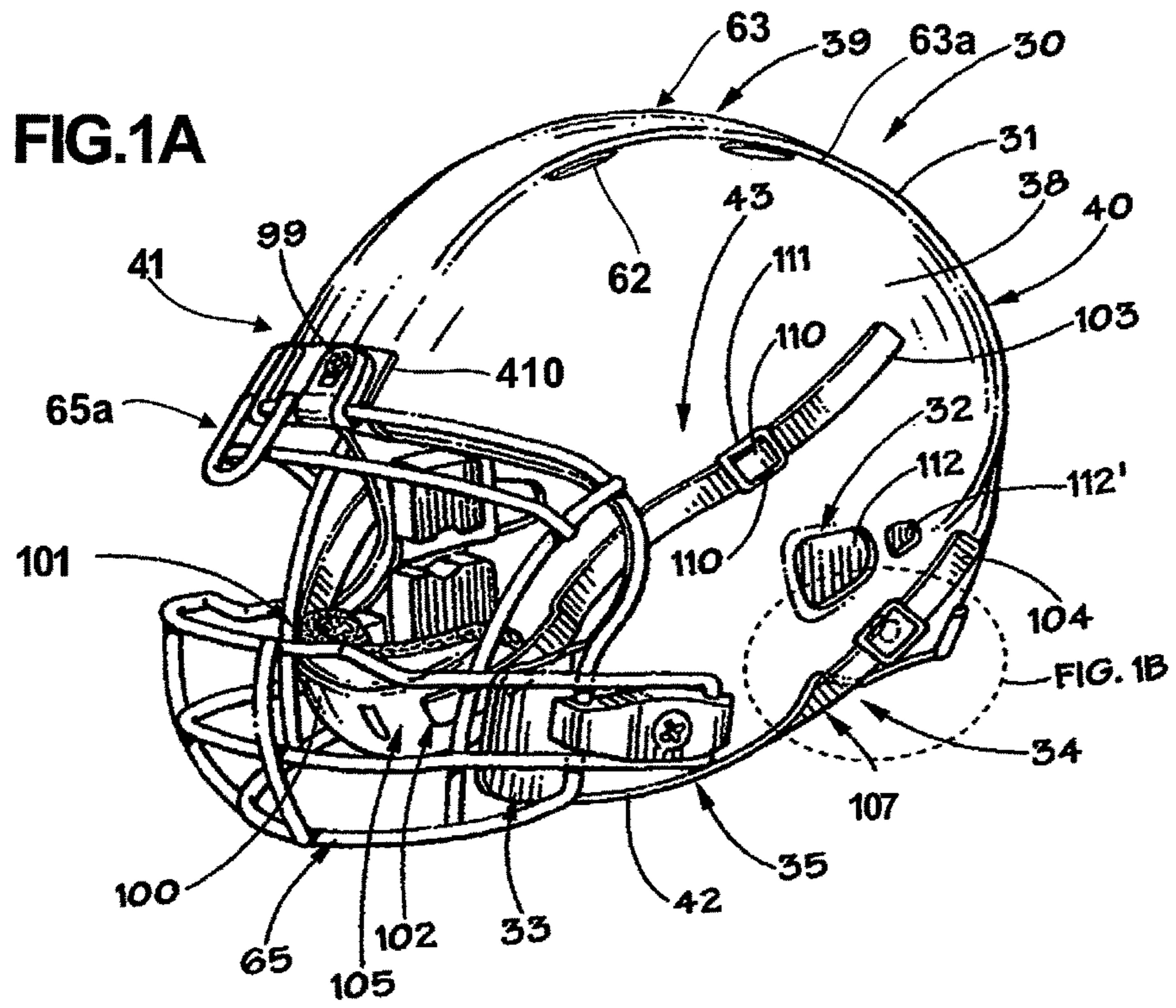
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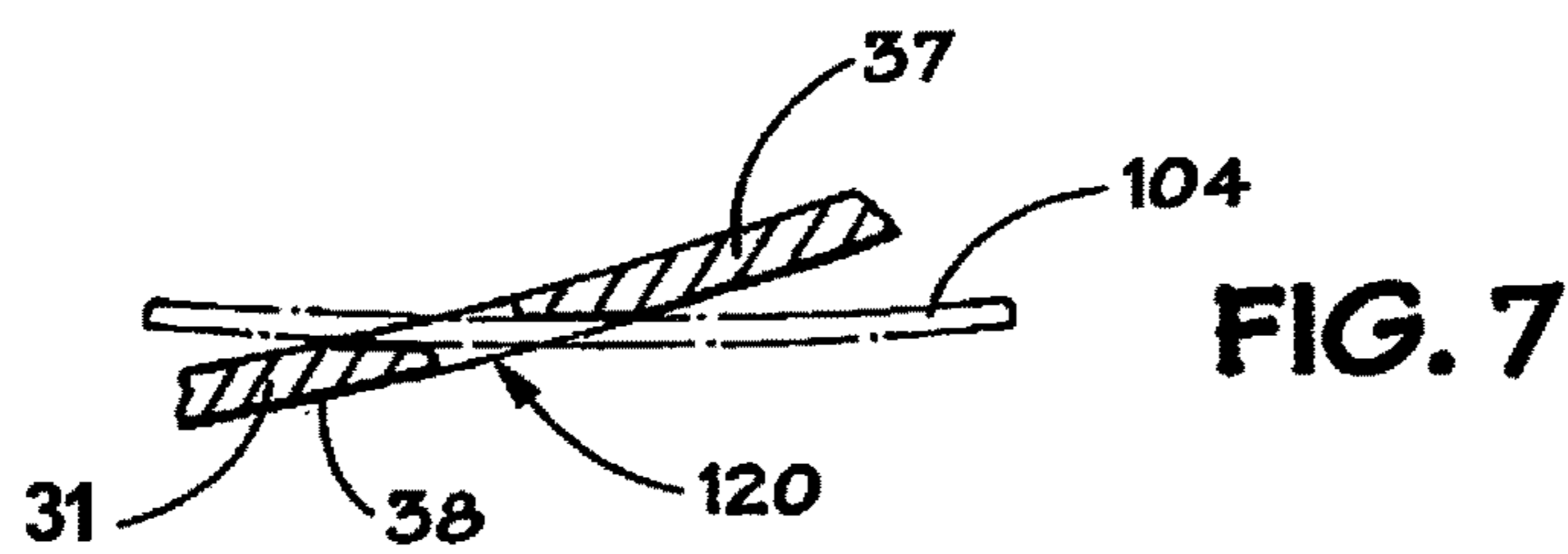
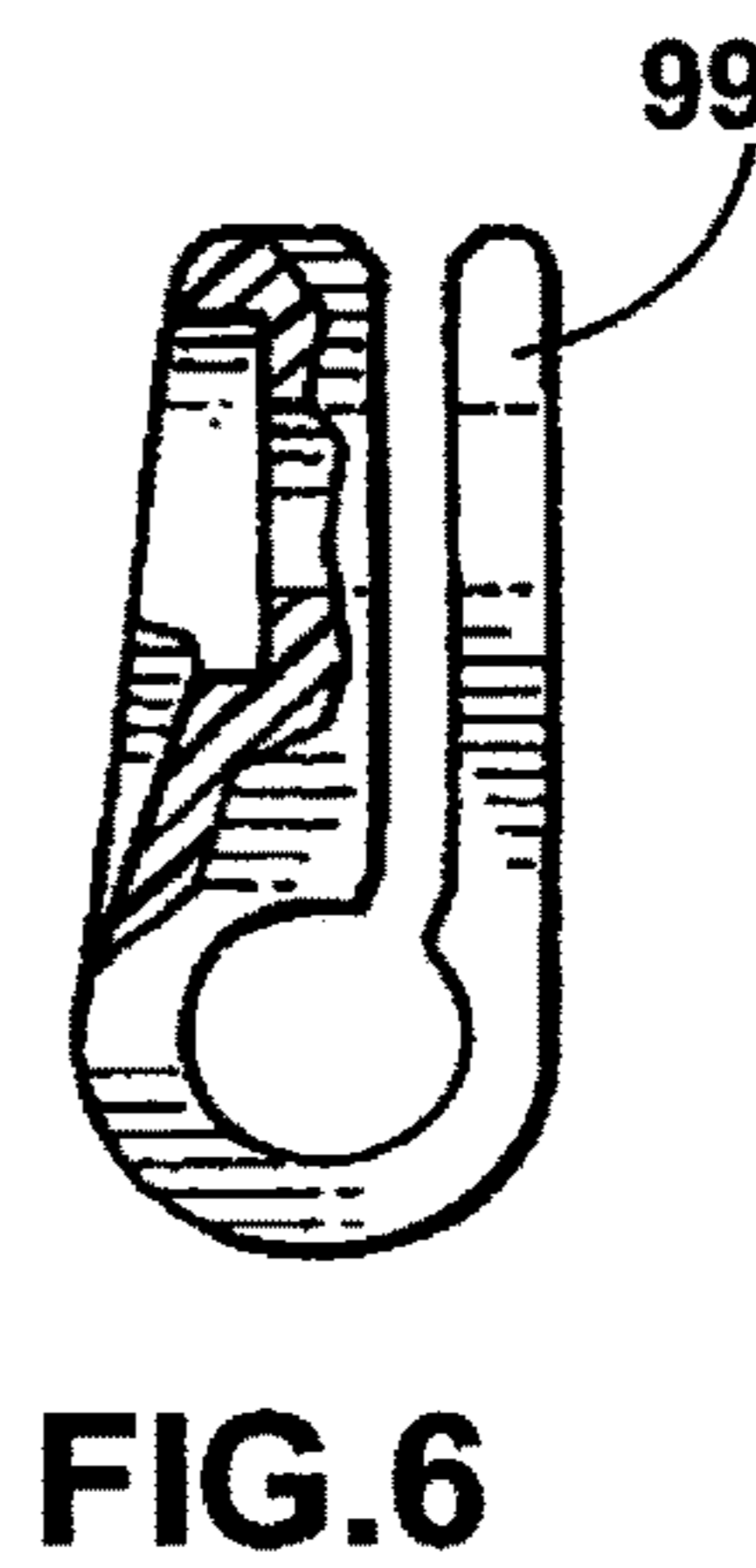
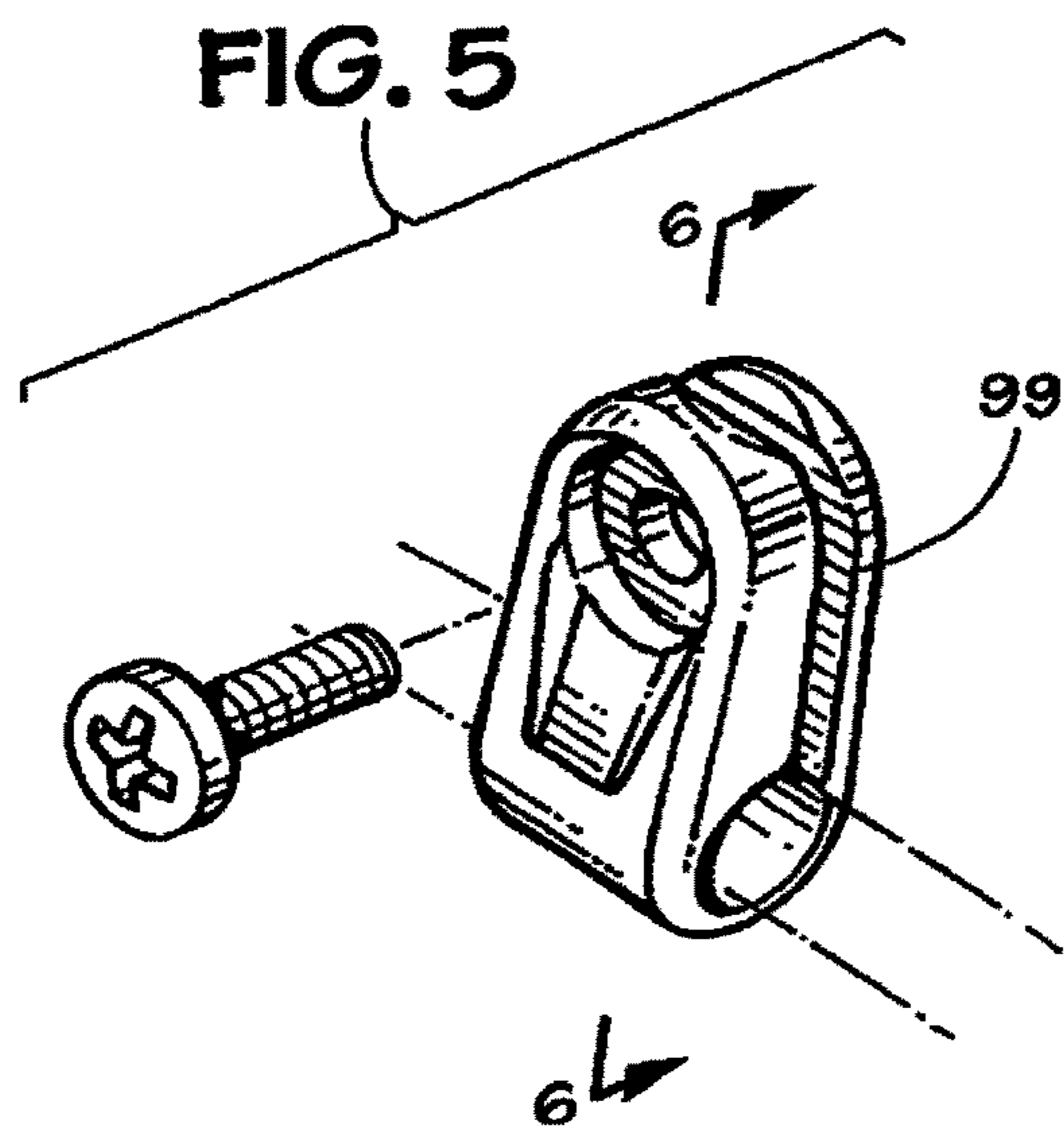
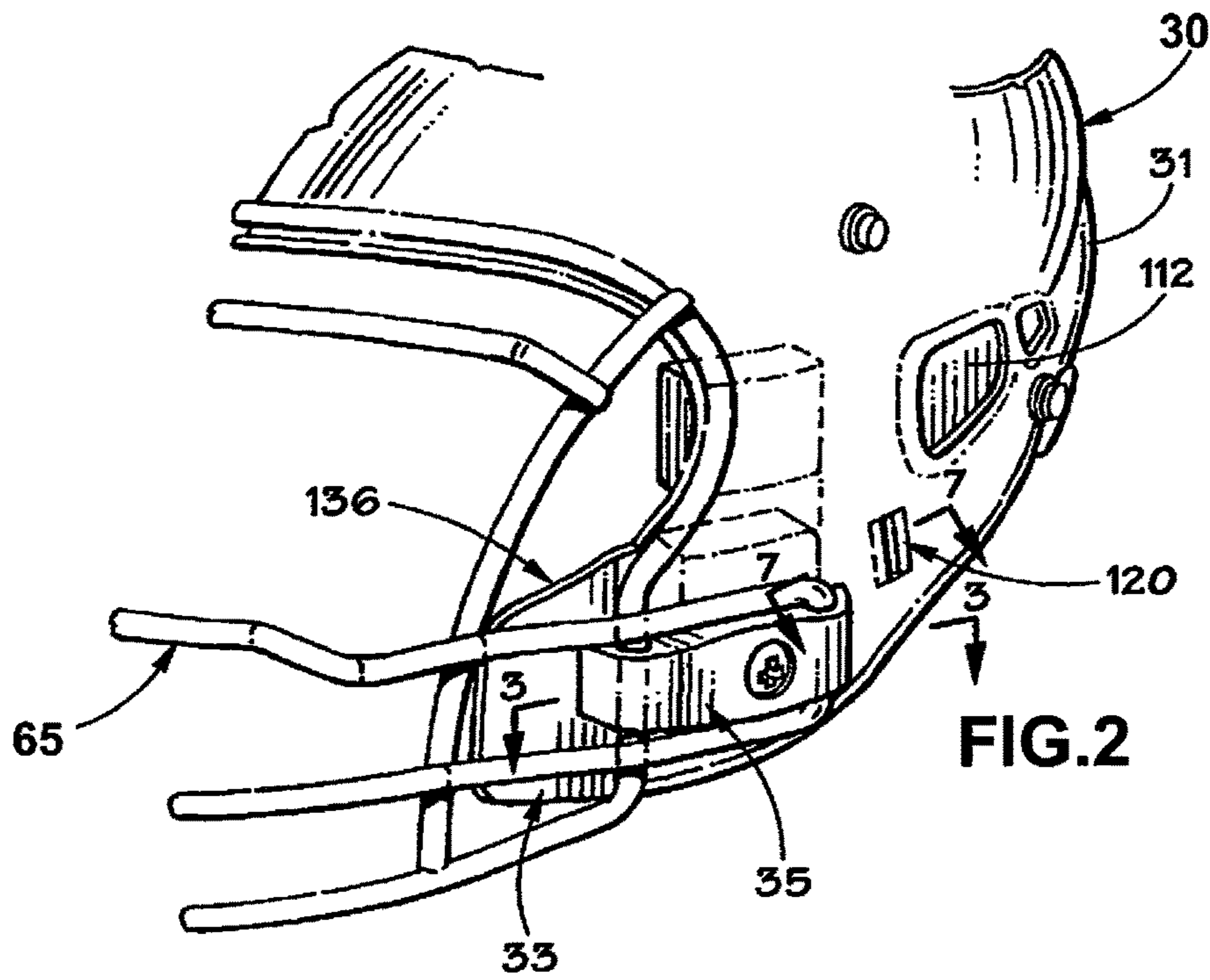




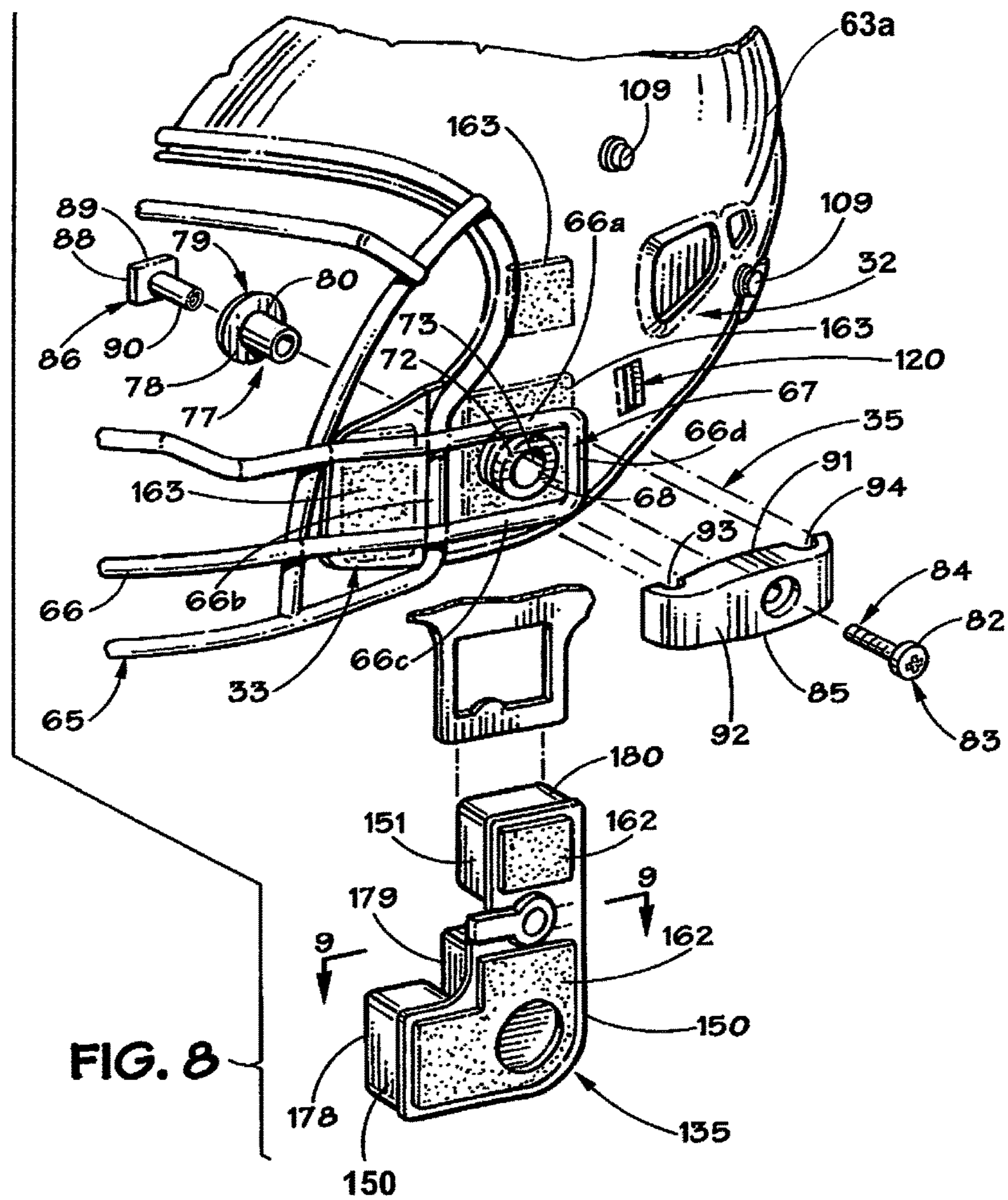




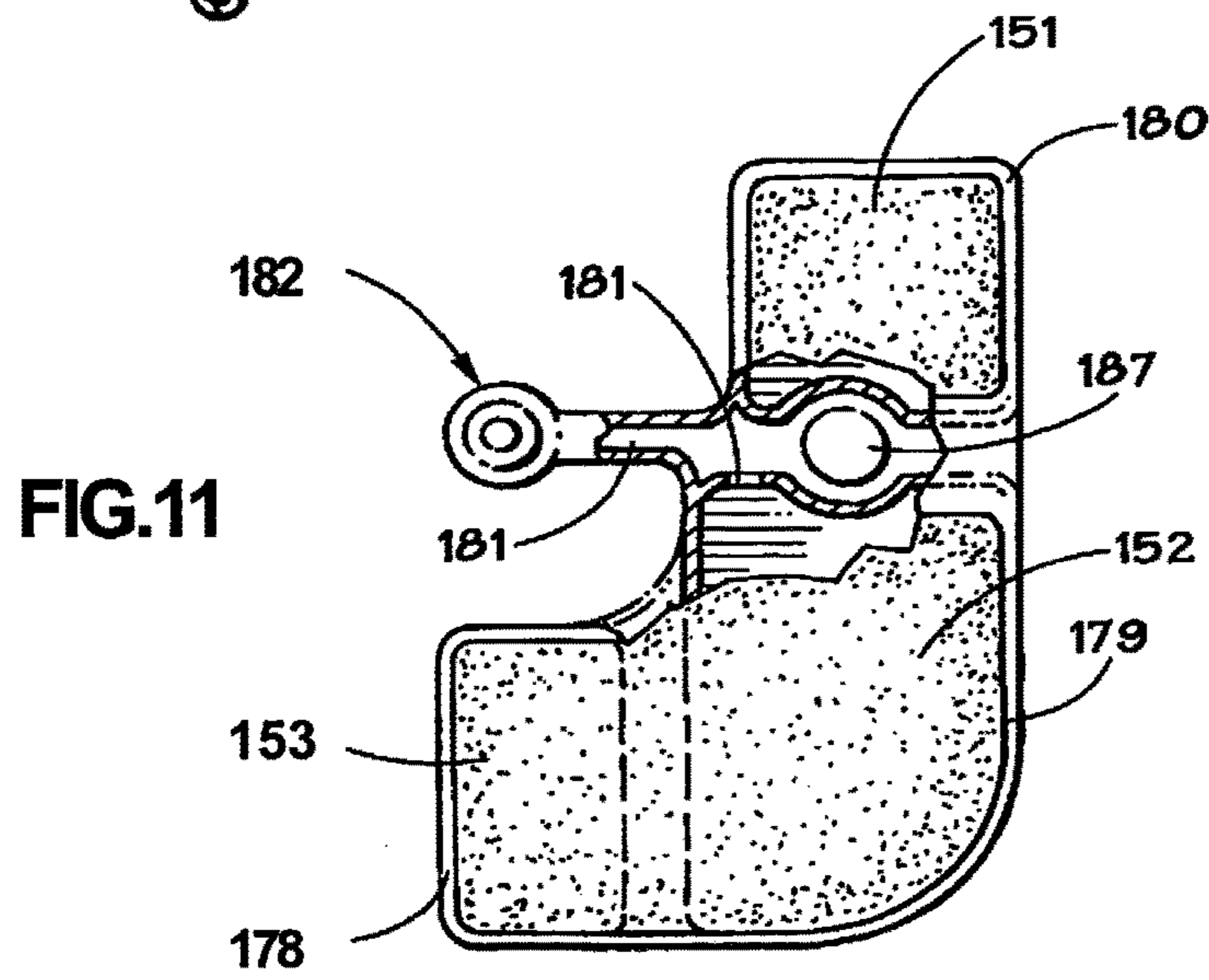
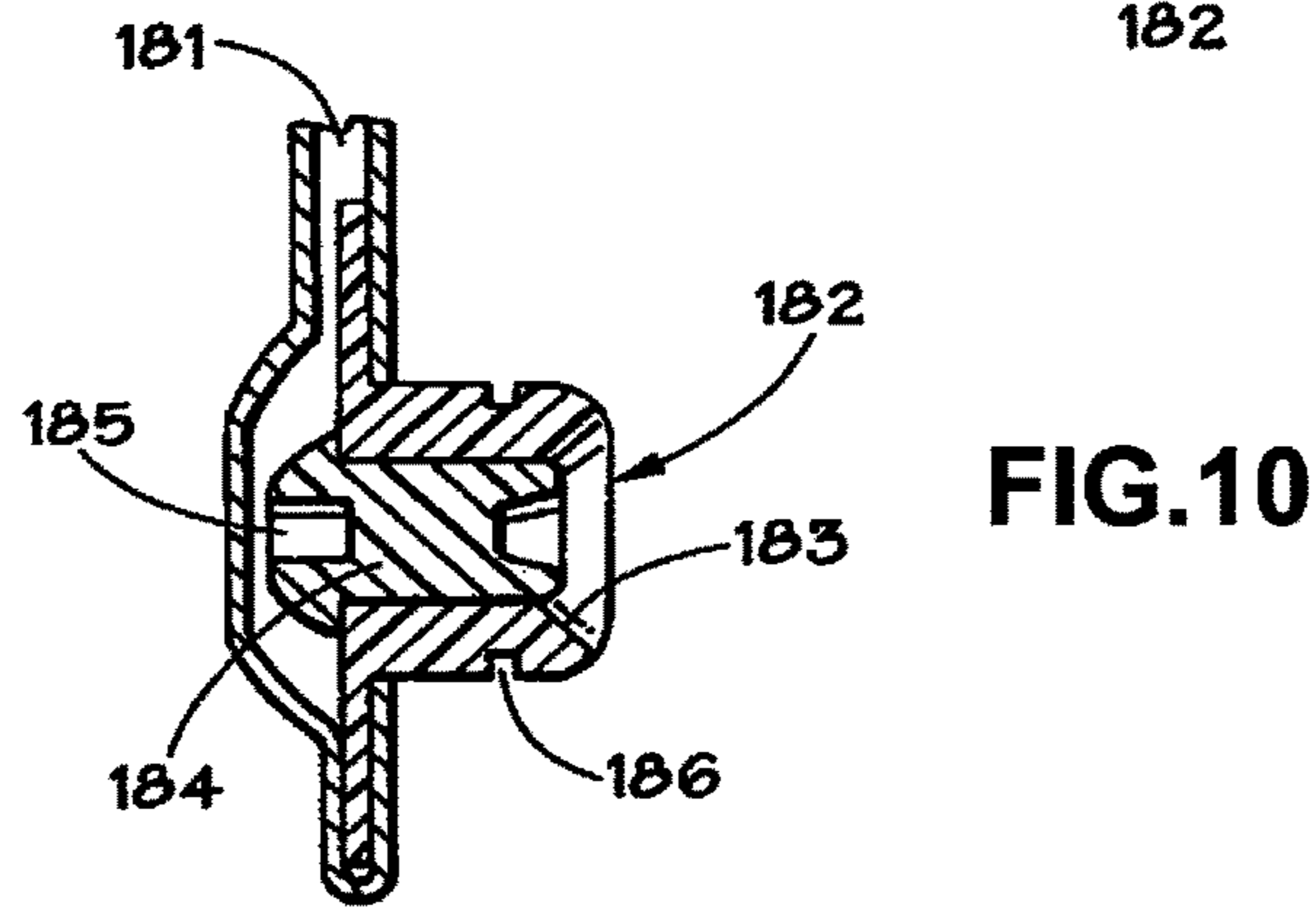
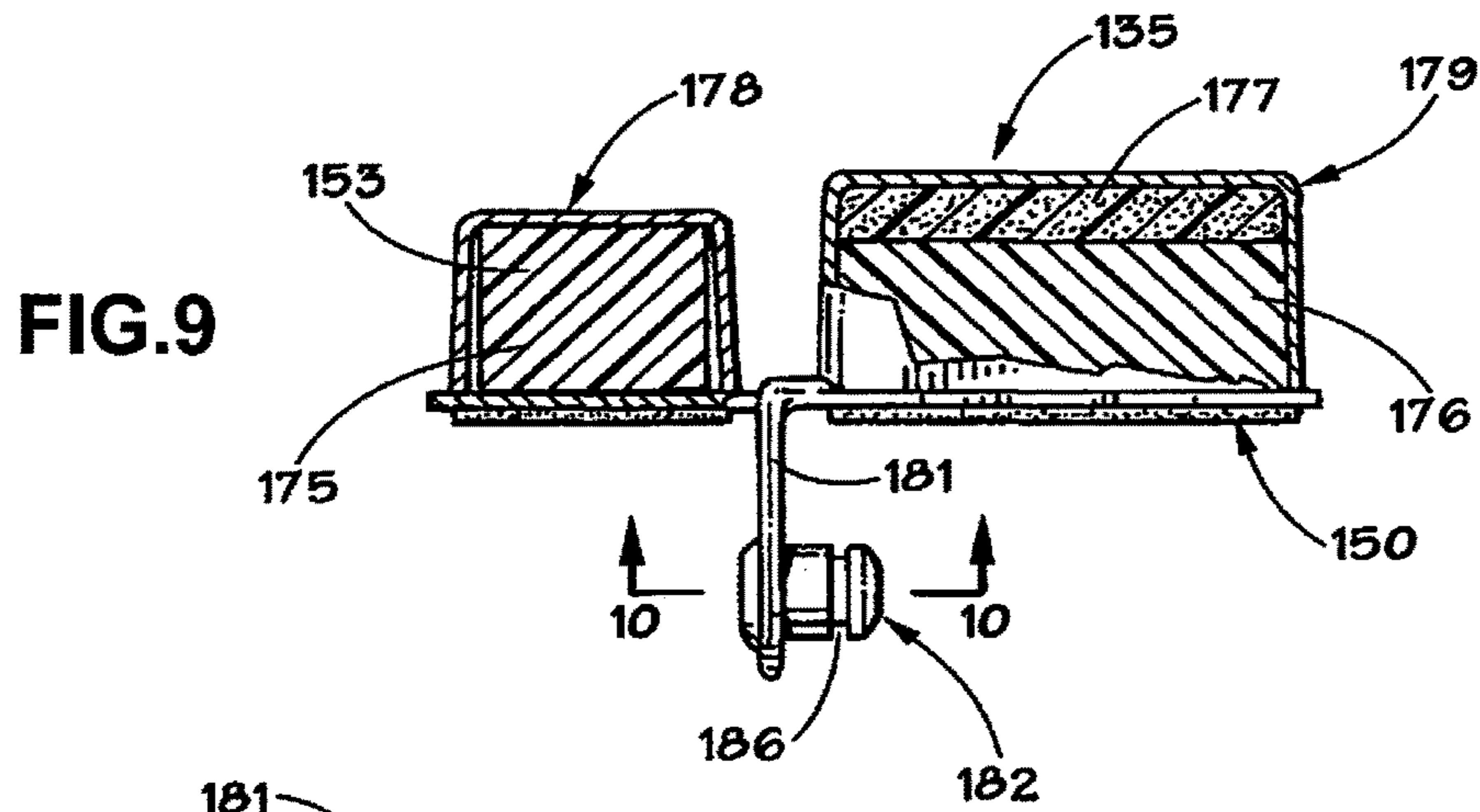




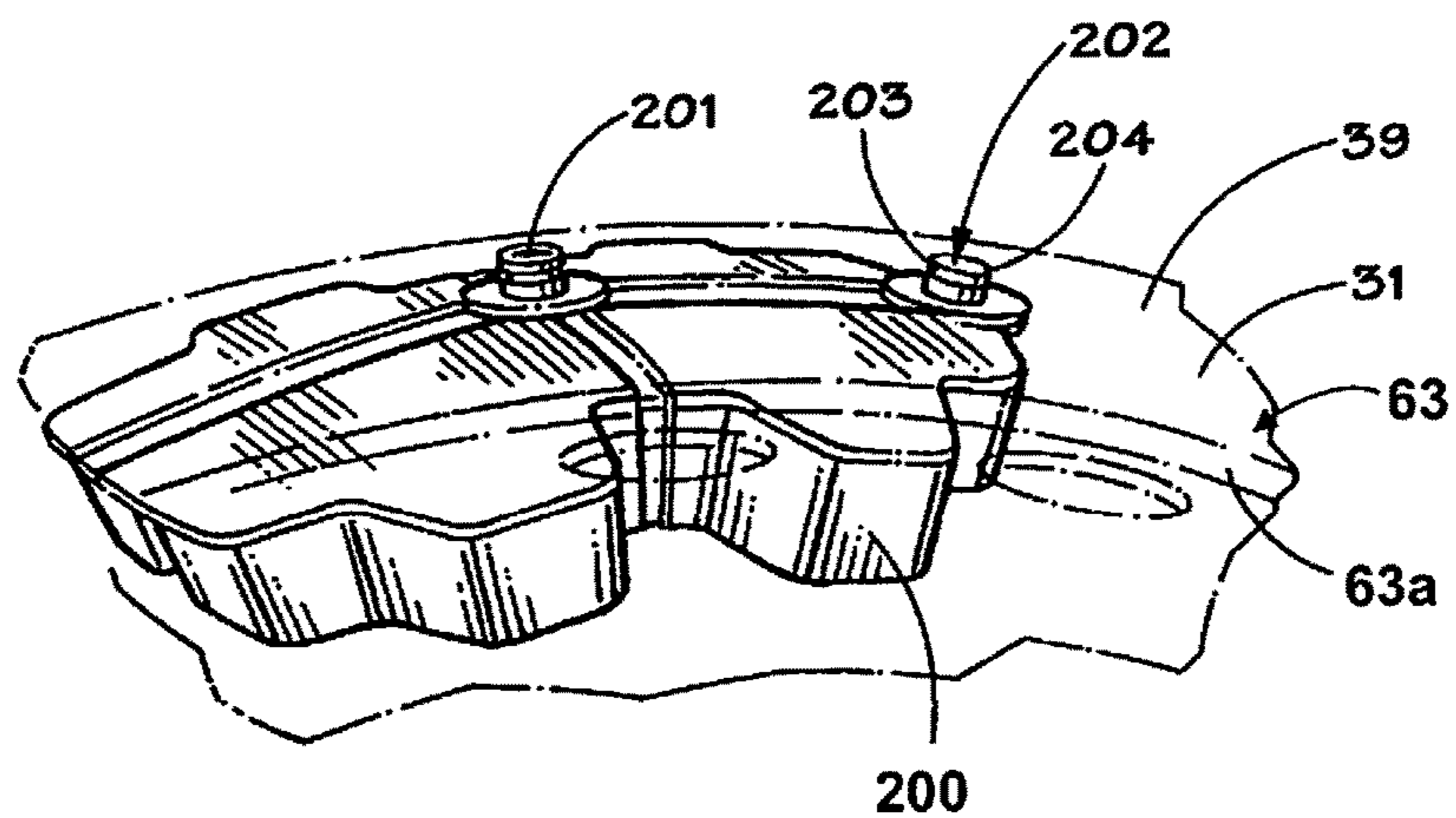
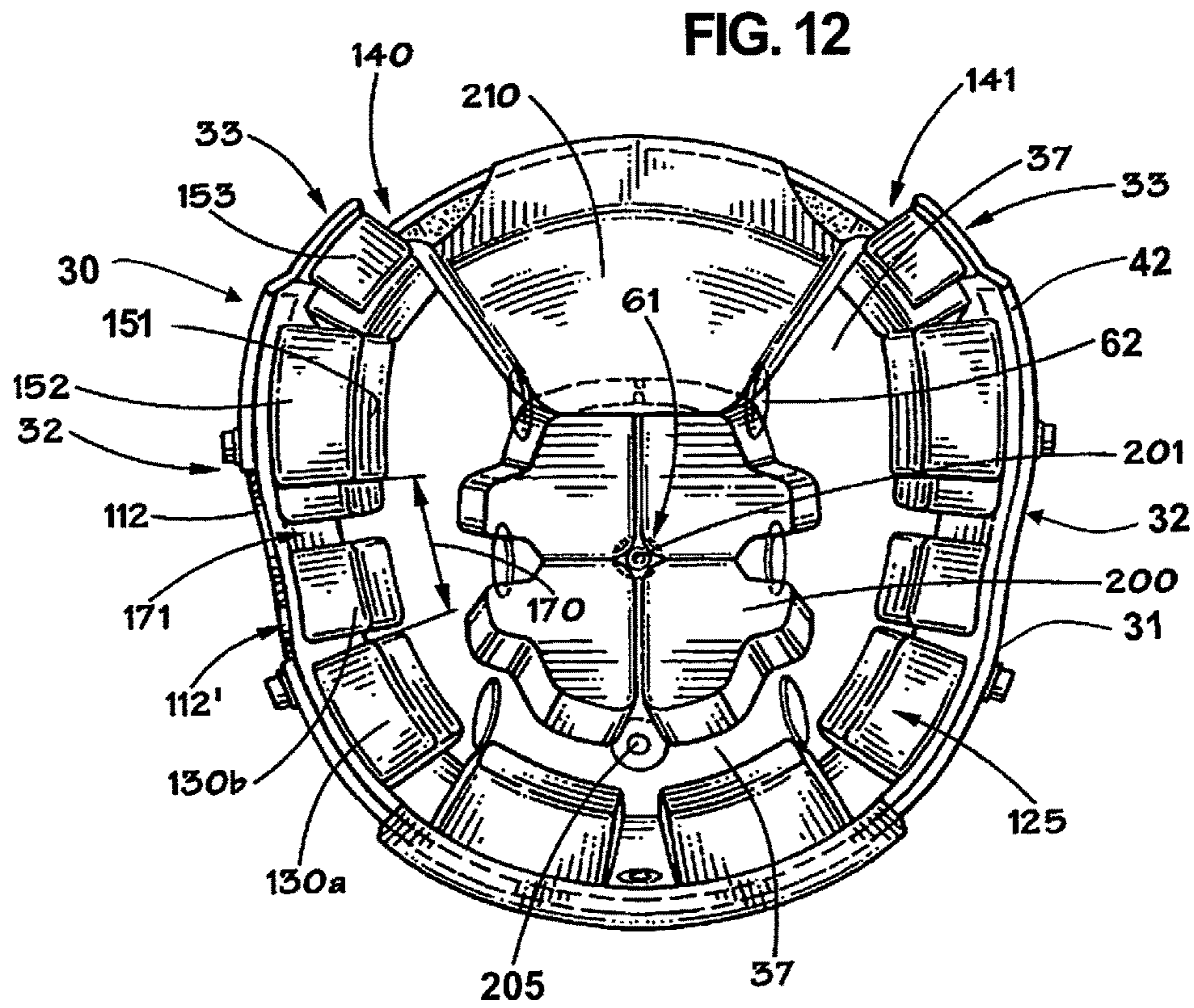


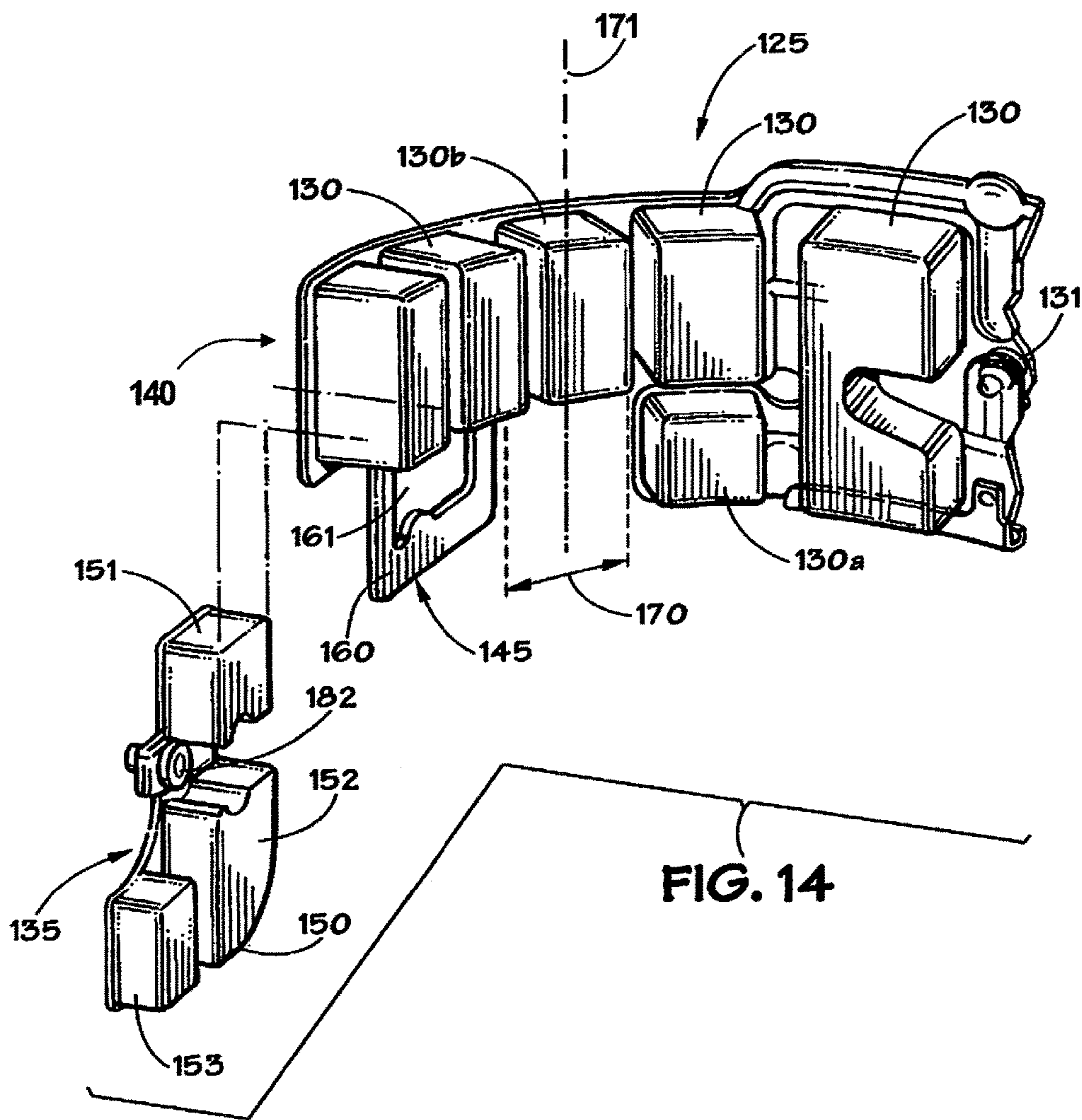




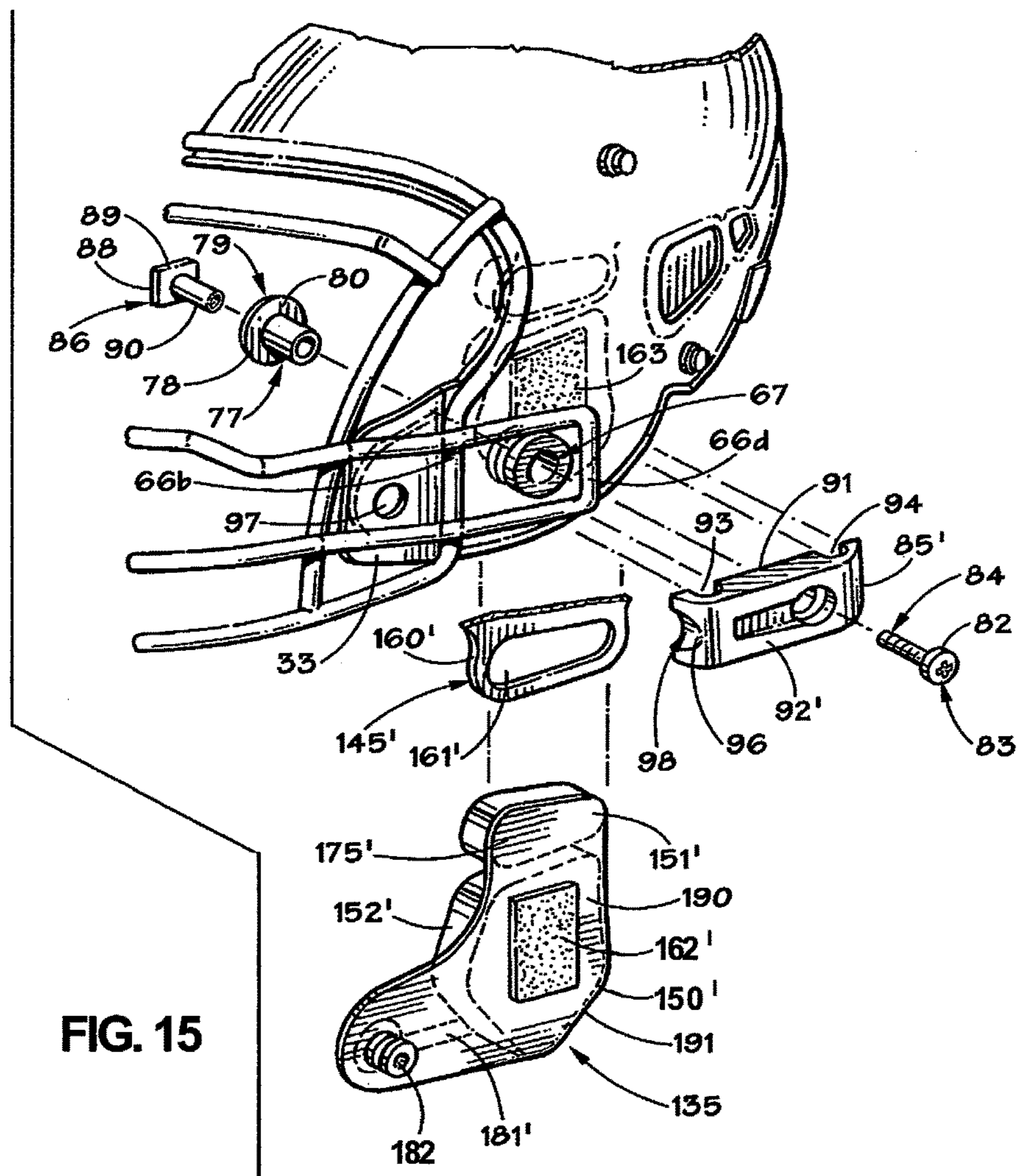












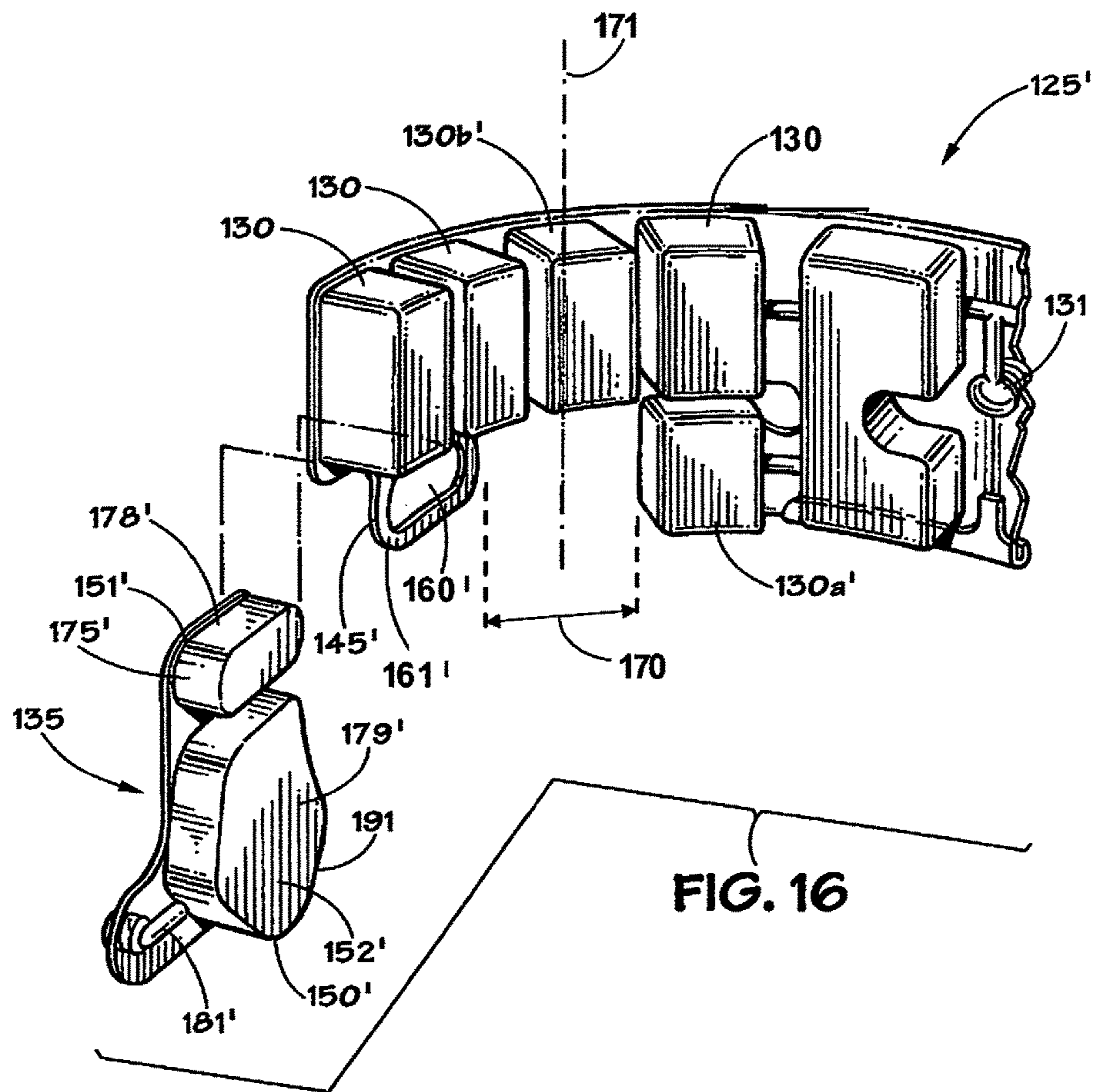


FIG. 16



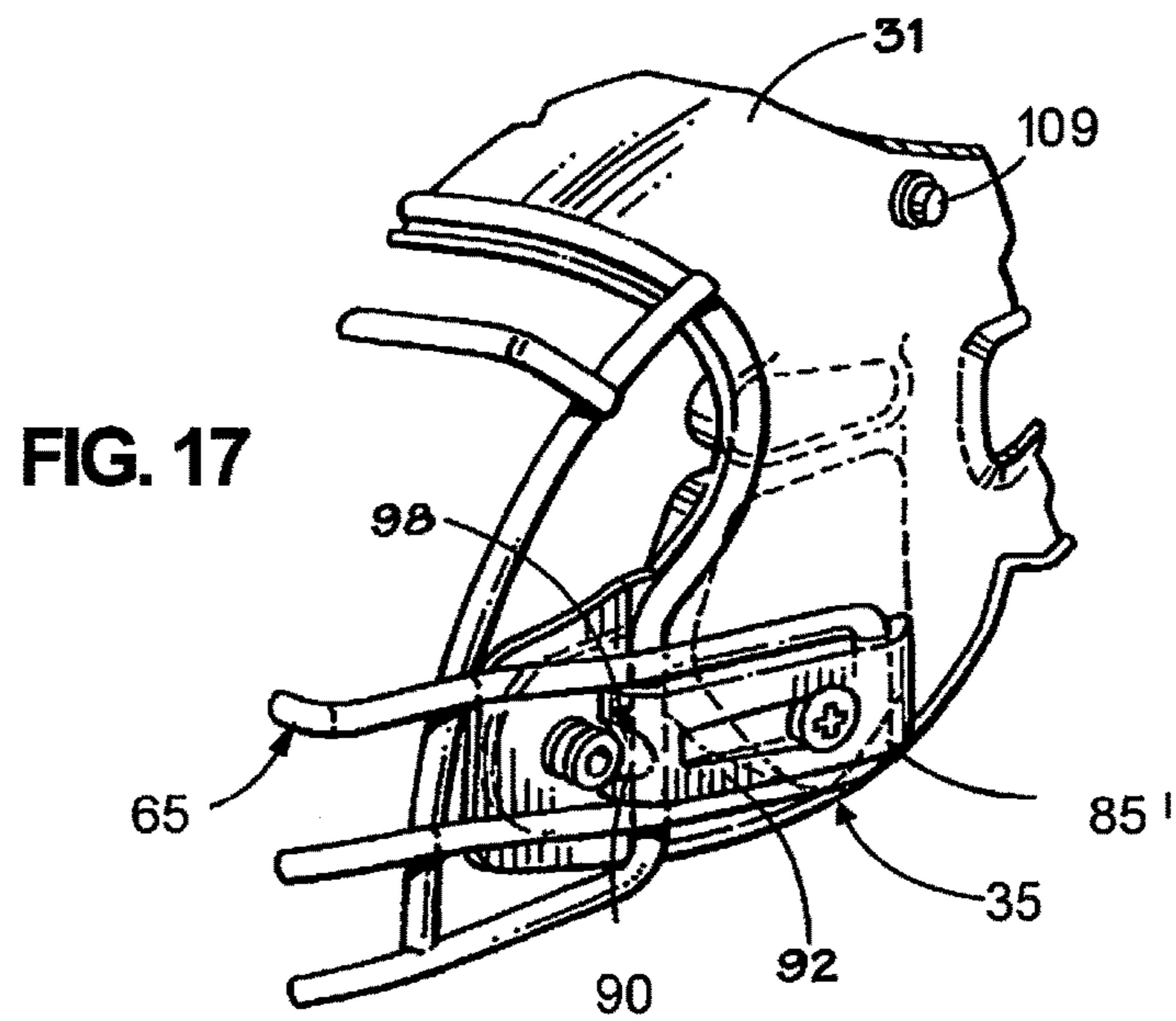
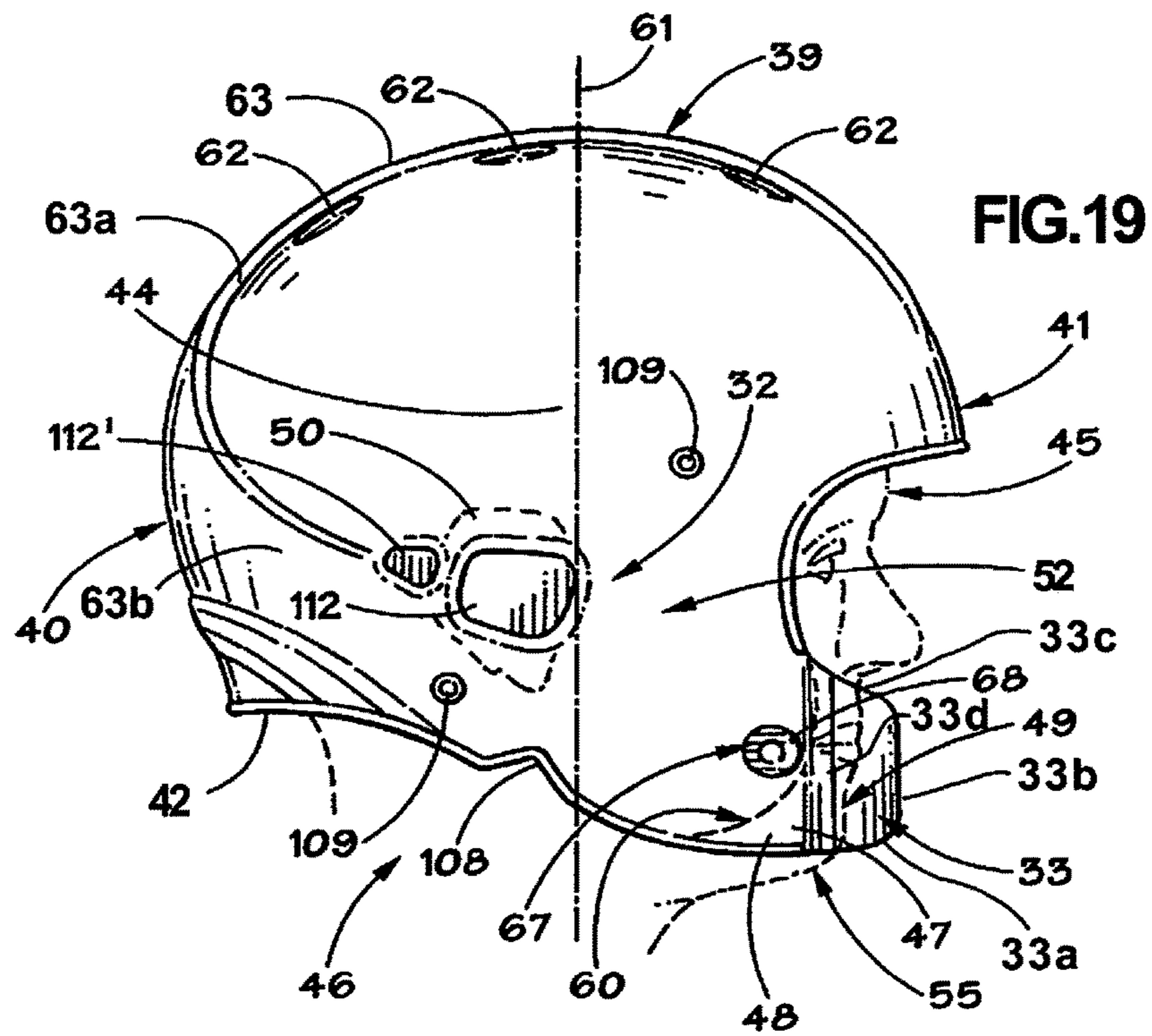


FIG. 18

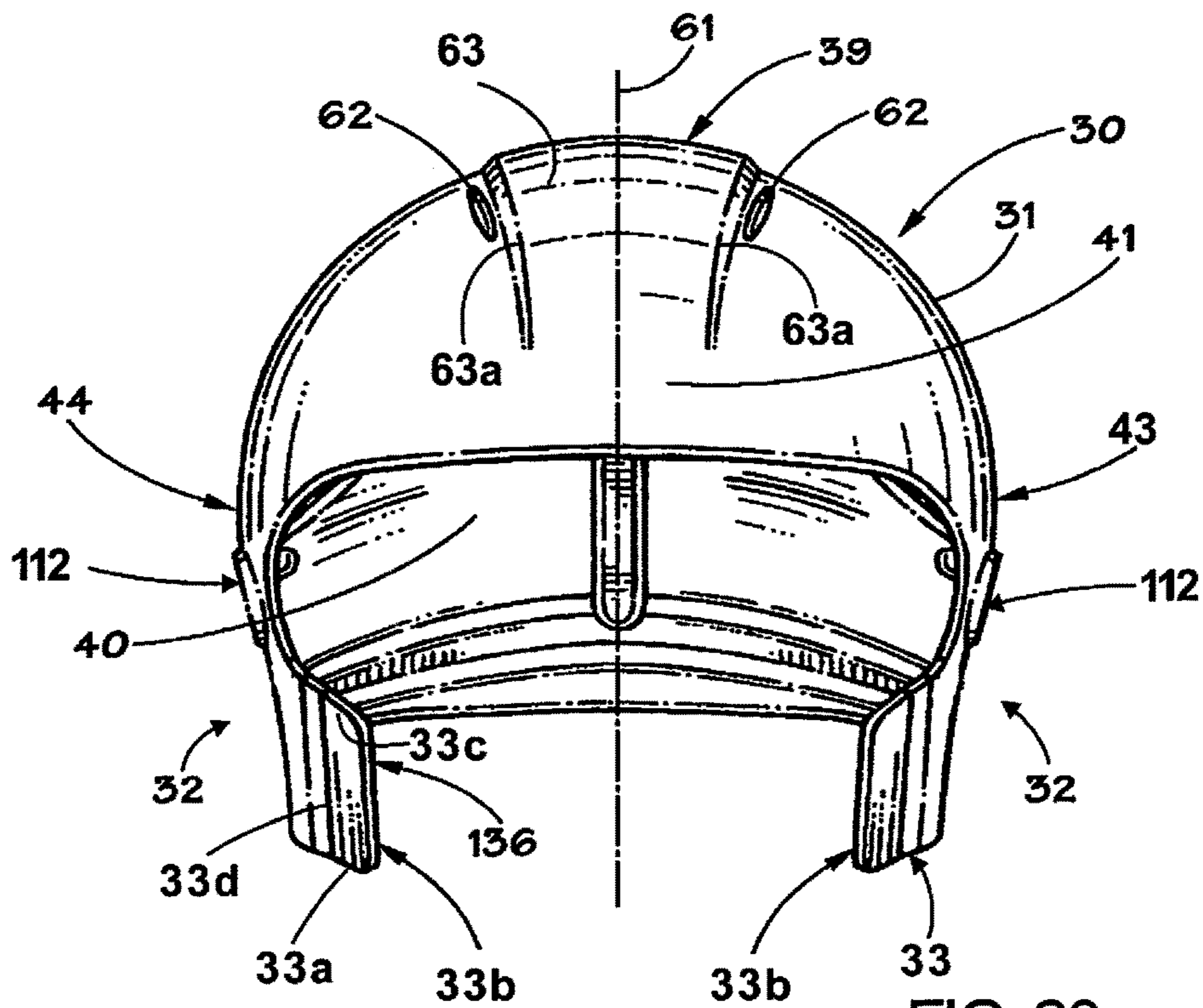
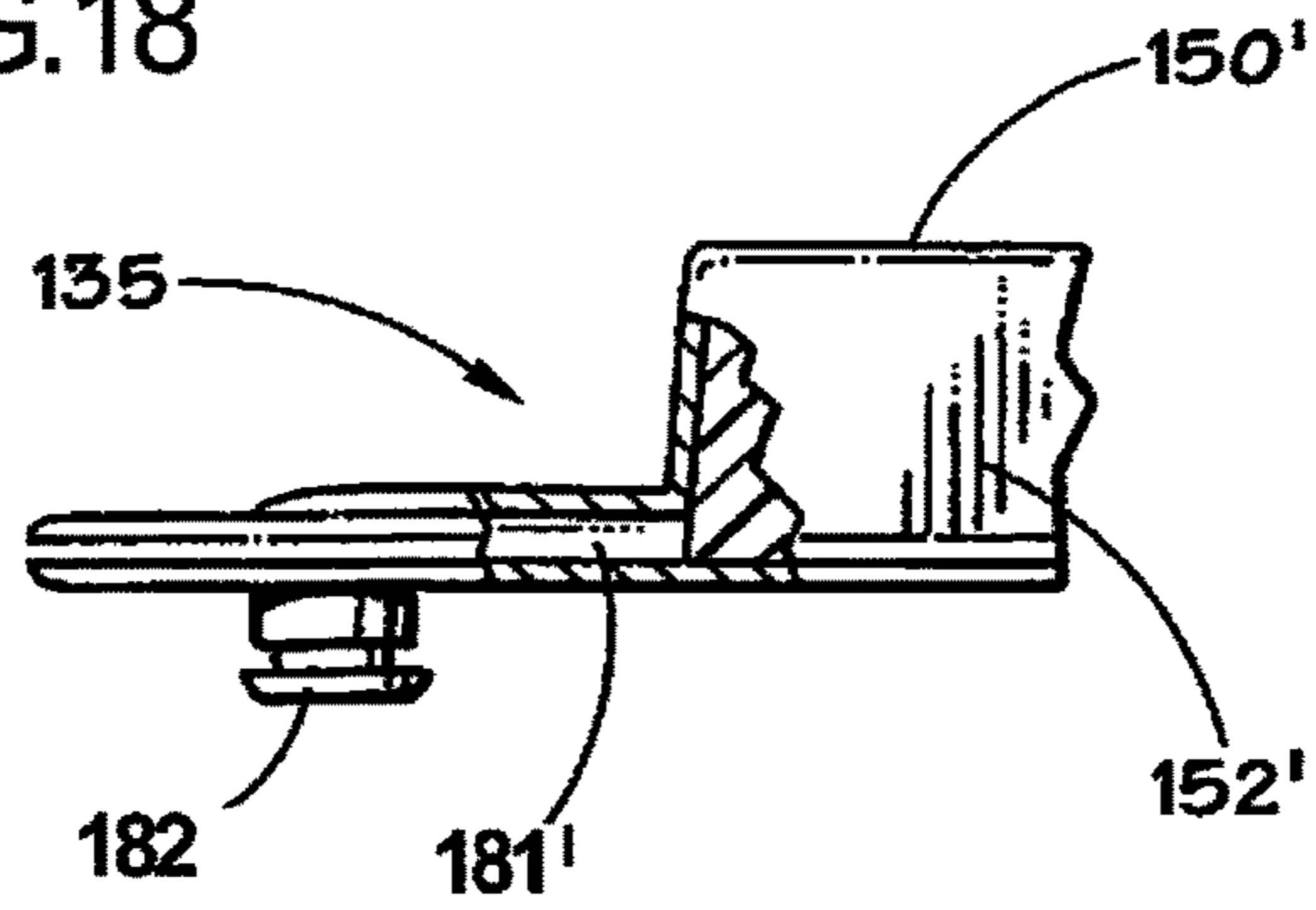


FIG. 20



**SPORTS HELMET****CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS**

This application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 13/153,197, filed on Jun. 3, 2011, which is a continuation application of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/653,078, filed on Jan. 10, 2007, now U.S. Pat. No. 7,954,177, which is a divisional application of U.S. application Ser. No. 11/208,233, filed on Aug. 18, 2005, now U.S. Pat. No. 7,240,376, which is a continuation application of U.S. application Ser. No. 10/427,236, filed May 1, 2003, now U.S. Pat. No. 6,934,971, which claims the benefit of Provisional Patent Application No. 60/376,898, filed May 1, 2002, which applications are incorporated herein by reference and made a part hereof.

**TECHNICAL FIELD**

The invention generally relates to a sports helmet, such as a football, lacrosse, hockey or baseball helmet.

**BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION**

Various activities, such as contact sports, and in particular the sport of football, require the use of helmets to attempt to protect participants from injury to their heads due to impact forces that may be sustained during such activities. Various types of helmets have been in use in the sport of football, ever since individuals began wearing helmets to attempt to protect their heads many years ago. Typically, these helmets have included: an outer shell, generally made of an appropriate plastic material, having the requisite strength and durability characteristics to enable them to be used in the sport of football; some type of shock absorbing liner within the shell; a face guard; and a chin protector, or chin strap, that fits snugly about the chin of the wear of the helmet, in order to secure the helmet to the wearer's head, as are all known in the art.

Over the years, various improvements have been made to the various components of a football helmet; however, in general, the overall configuration and shape of a football helmet, has remained the same for many years. In this regard, a typical football helmet has included an ear flap as a part of the shell forming the helmet, and the ear flap generally overlies an ear of the wearer and a portion of a cheek of the wearer; however, the jaw of the wearer typically extends outwardly beyond the outer periphery of the helmet, whereby a majority portion of the jaw of the wearer has only been protected by the chin protector.

In general, conventional football helmets presently have ear flaps and the lower portions thereof taper inwardly toward the neck and rearmost portions of the player's jawbone overlaid by the ear flaps. As a consequence of this structure, when a player removes his, or her, helmet, it is necessary to pull the sides, or ear flaps, of the helmet outwardly so that the helmet may clear the player's ears. Further in this regard, conventional helmets may also include pads adjacent the player's ear and these pads generally are located along the lower and front edge of the ear flap. These pads must also be pulled away from the ears of the player when removing a conventional helmet. The repeated putting on, and taking off, a football helmet may cause irritation to the player's ear. It would be desirable if the putting on, and removal of, a football helmet did not

cause repeated sliding frictional contact with a player's ears, to prevent potential irritation to the player's ear.

Conventional football helmets utilize face guards which are generally made of either a metallic or thermoplastic material. Since a player wears a helmet for a considerable period of time during practices and games, it would be desirable to minimize the weight of the helmet, while not sacrificing protection. The face guards of conventional helmets are typically attached to the sides of the helmet, as well as upon the front of the helmet. Thus, the face guard must extend rearwardly in order to be attached to the side of the helmet. It would be desirable if the size of the face guard could be reduced, thereby reducing the weight of the face guard used in the helmet.

While it is the desire and goal that a football helmet, and other types of protective helmets, prevent injuries from occurring, it should be noted that as to the helmet of the present invention, as well as prior art helmets, due to the nature of contact sports (including football), no protective equipment or helmet can completely prevent injuries to those individuals playing sports. It should be further noted that no protective equipment can completely prevent injuries to a player, especially when the player uses the equipment improperly and/or employs poor form or technique. For example, if the football player uses his football helmet in an improper manner, such as to butt, ram, or spear an opposing player, which is in violation of the rules of football and severe head and/or neck injuries, paralysis, or death to the football player, as well as possible injury to the football player's opponent can result. No football helmet, or protective helmet, such as that of the present invention, can prevent head, chin, or neck injuries a football player might receive while participating in the sport of football. The helmet of the present invention is believed to offer protection to football players, but it is believed that no helmet can, or will ever completely prevent head injuries to football players.

**SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION**

In accordance with the invention, the foregoing advantages are believed to have been achieved by the football helmet of the present invention. The football helmet of the present invention may include: an outer shell having an inner wall surface and an outer wall surface, the shell including a crown, a back, a front, a lower edge surface, and two sides, the shell being adapted to receive the head of wearer of the helmet, the wearer having a lower jaw having two side portions; each side of the shell includes an ear flap adapted to generally overlie an ear and a portion of a cheek of the wearer; each ear flap generally extending downwardly from its respective side; each ear flap including a jaw flap attached to the ear flap, each jaw flap extending from the ear flap forwardly toward the front of the shell and adapted to generally extend to overlie a side portion of the lower jaw of the wearer of the helmet; each side having a chin protector connector, adapted to connect a portion of a chin protector to the shell; each side having a face guard connector, adapted to connect a portion of a face guard to the shell; and a liner connector, adapted to connect a shock absorbing liner to a portion of the inner wall surface of the shell. Another feature of the present invention is that there may be a face guard connected to at least both sides of the helmet by the face guard connectors, each face guard connector including a shock absorber member adapted to substantially omnidirectionally distribute an impact force, exerted upon the face guard, throughout the shell. A further feature of this aspect



of the present invention is that each shock absorber member may be a grommet disposed in an opening formed in a side of the shell.

In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, the football helmet may include a chin protector having two sides and at least two flexible members associated with each side of the chin protector, the at least two flexible members adapted to engage with one of the chin protector connectors on the sides of the shell. Another feature of this aspect of the invention is that the chin protector connector may include at least two notches formed in the lower edge surface of the shell, with at least one notch being disposed on each side of the shell, and at least one of the flexible members on each side of the chin protector passes through at least one of the notches on each side of the shell. A further aspect of the invention is that the at least two notches may be disposed in the lower edge surface of the shell adjacent each ear flap of the shell. An additional feature of this aspect of the invention is that the chin protector connector may include at least one slot formed in each side of the shell, and at least one of the flexible members on each side of the chin protector passes through the at least one slot.

In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, the football helmet may include a shock absorbing liner associated with the inner wall surface of the shell by the liner connector. An additional feature of this aspect of the present invention is that the shock absorbing liner may include a plurality of resilient members adapted to absorb shock forces exerted upon the shell, and the plurality of resilient members may be disposed along the inner wall surface of the back and sides of the shell, including at least one resilient pad member disposed upon the inner wall surface of a portion of each of the jaw flaps of the shell. A further feature of this aspect of the present invention is that each of the at least one resilient pad members may be formed integral with the plurality of resilient members, or at least one resilient pad member may be releasably secured to the plurality of resilient members. An additional feature of this aspect of the present invention is that on each side of the inner wall surface of the shell, an ear channel may be formed between at least one of the resilient members of the shock absorbing liner and the at least one resilient pad member disposed upon the inner wall surface of a portion of the jaw flap, and each ear channel may be disposed adjacent an ear opening formed in each flap.

Another aspect of the present invention is that the outer shell may have a vertical, longitudinal axis extending downwardly from the crown of the helmet, and each ear flap may generally lie in a plane which is substantially parallel to the longitudinal axis of the outer shell. Another feature of this aspect of the present invention is that the outer shell of the helmet may have a vertical, longitudinal axis extending downwardly from the crown, and each jaw flap may generally lie in a plane which is substantially parallel to the longitudinal axis of the outer shell.

The football helmet of the present invention, when compared with previously proposed conventional football helmets, is believed to have a number of advantages, including but not limited to: offering protection to football players against injuries caused by impact forces exerted upon the football helmet during the playing of the game of football; providing a football helmet which is easier for the wearer of the helmet to put on and take off, and may minimize irritation to a player's ear; providing protection for the jaw of the wearer; and providing a smaller, thus lighter in weight, face guard.

Other features and advantages of the invention will be apparent from the following specification taken in conjunction with the following drawings.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of an embodiment of a sports helmet showing a face guard of the present invention;

FIG. 1 A is perspective view of another embodiment of a sports helmet showing a face guard of the present invention;

FIG. 1B is a perspective view of the portion of the helmet of FIG. 1A shown within dotted lines 1B;

FIG. 2 is a partial perspective view of the helmet and face guard of FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is a cross-sectional view taken along line 3-3 of FIG. 2, showing an embodiment of the face guard and a face guard connector of the present invention;

FIG. 4 is a partial side view of the face guard and the connector of FIG. 3;

FIG. 5 is a perspective view of a face guard mounting clip of FIGS. 1A and 1B;

FIG. 6 is a cross-sectional view of the face guard mounting clip of FIG. 5, taken along line 6-6 of FIG. 5;

FIG. 7 is a partial cross-sectional view of the football helmet of FIGS. 1 and 2, taken along line 7-7 of FIG. 2;

FIG. 8 is a partial exploded view of the football helmet and the face guard of the present invention;

FIG. 9 is a cross-sectional view of the resilient pad member of FIG. 8, taken along line 9-9 of FIG. 8;

FIG. 10 is a partial cross-sectional view of the resilient pad member of FIGS. 8 and 9 taken along line 10-10 of FIG. 9;

FIG. 11 is a side view of the resilient pad member of FIGS. 8-10;

FIG. 12 is a bottom view of the football helmet of FIGS. 1 and 8, with the face guard removed;

FIG. 13 is a partial perspective view of the crown of the football helmet of FIGS. 1 and 1A, showing a crown pad in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 14 is a partial perspective view of a shock absorbing liner in accordance with the present invention, corresponding to the shock absorbing liner shown in FIGS. 8 and 12;

FIG. 15 is a partial exploded perspective view of the helmet and the face guard of the present invention;

FIG. 16 is a partial perspective view of another shock absorbing liner provided with another embodiment of the resilient pad member, of the present invention, as is shown in FIG. 15;

FIG. 17 is a partial perspective view of the face guard and the helmet of FIG. 15;

FIG. 18 is a partial cross-sectional view of the resilient pad member of FIG. 15 taken along line 18-18 of FIG. 15;

FIG. 19 is a side view of the helmet of the present invention, illustrating the chin protector connector of the football helmet of FIG. 1A, including a wearer of the helmet being partially shown in phantom lines, including a general outline of a conventional ear flap being also shown in phantom lines; and

FIG. 20 is a front view of the football helmet of the present invention of both FIGS. 1 and 1A.

While the invention will be described in connection with the preferred embodiments shown herein, it will be understood that it is not intended to limit the invention to those embodiments. On the contrary, it is intended to cover all alternatives, modifications, and equivalents, as may be



included within the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION

In FIGS. 1, 1A, and 19, a football helmet 30 in accordance with the present invention is shown to generally include: an outer shell 31, ear flap 32, each ear flap 32 including a jaw flap 33, a chin protector connector 34, a face guard connector 35, and a liner connector (not shown). Outer shell 31 is preferably made of any suitable plastic material having the requisite strength and durability characteristics to function as a football helmet, or other type of protective helmet, such as polycarbonate plastic materials, one of which is known as LEXAN®, as is known in the art. Outer shell 31 has an inner wall surface 37 (FIG. 12) and an outer wall surface 38. Shell 31 further includes a crown region 39, a back (or rear) region 40, a front region 41, a lower edge surface 42, and two side regions 43 (FIGS. 1 and 1A) and 44 (FIG. 19). As is known in the art, and as will be hereinafter described in greater detail, shell 31 is adapted to receive the head 45 of a wearer 46 of the helmet 30, the wearer 46 having a lower jaw 47 (FIG. 19) having two side portions 48 (FIG. 19), only the right side portion 48 of jaw 47 being illustrated. As shown in FIG. 19, the lower jaw 47 terminates generally adjacent to the chin 49 of the wearer's head 45 toward the front of the head 45, and the lower jaw, or mandible 47, generally ends its connection with the upper jaw generally adjacent, and forwardly of ears 50 of wearer 46.

Still with reference to FIGS. 1, 1A and 19, each side region 43, 44 of the shell 31 includes an ear flap 32, the left ear flap 32 being shown in FIGS. 1 and 1A and the right ear flap 32 being illustrated in FIG. 19, and ear flaps 32 are adapted to generally overlie an ear 50 (FIG. 19) and portion of a cheek 52 of the wearer 46. Each ear flap 32 generally extends downwardly from its respective side 43, 44, and in general extends in a direction extending from crown 39 downwardly toward the lower edge surface 42 of shell 31. Each ear flap 32 includes a jaw flap 33, the left hand jaw flaps 33 being illustrated in FIGS. 1 and 1A, and the right jaw flap 33 being illustrated in FIG. 19. Each jaw flap 33 extends from its corresponding ear flap 32 forwardly toward the front 41 of the shell 31, and as seen in FIG. 19 as adapted to generally extend to overlie a side portion 48 of the lower jaw 47 of the wearer 46 of the helmet.

As shown in FIG. 19, jaw flap 33 is shown to extend forwardly to overlie a forwardly disposed portion 55 of lower jaw 47 disposed toward the chin 49 of wearer 46. As illustrated in FIG. 19, jaw flap 33 extends forwardly enough to overlie the side of the chin 49 of wearer 46. In this regard, it should be noted that helmets 30 of the present invention are generally made with outer shells 31 of varying sizes, dependent upon the size of the head of the particular wearer of the helmet. In FIG. 19, helmet 30 is shown superimposed upon what is believed to be an average size head of a wearer of the helmet 30, whereby jaw flap 33 is shown to generally overlie the entire side portion 48 of lower jaw 47, including the forwardly disposed portion 55 of lower jaw 47 adjacent the chin 49 of wearer 46, including overlying the side of the chin 49 of wearer 46. Since FIG. 19 is not a representation of all sizes of heads and all types of chin structures, such as chins which may greatly extend outwardly away from the head of the wearer, it should be understood that it is perhaps possible that someone wearing a helmet 30 in accordance with the present invention may have a slight side portion of his or her chin extending outwardly beyond the outer periphery of jaw flap 33. It is believed that jaw flap 33 will

overlie at least the forwardly disposed portion 55 of the lower jaw 47 of virtually all wearers of helmets 30. In this regard, the outer periphery 60, shown in phantom lines in FIG. 19, of a conventional ear flap, without the jaw flap 33 of the present invention generally does not overlie a forwardly disposed portion 55 of the lower jaw, or mandible, 47 of a wearer of a conventional helmet. Furthermore, the ear flap of a conventional football helmet virtually never overlies the chin 49 of a wearer of a conventional helmet.

With reference to FIGS. 12, 19, and 20, the outer shell 31 has a vertical, longitudinal axis 61 generally extending downwardly from crown 39, and each ear flap 32 generally lies in a plane which is substantially parallel to the longitudinal axis 61 of shell 31. Similarly, each jaw flap 33 also generally lies in a plane which is substantially parallel to the longitudinal axis 61 of the outer shell 31. As shown in FIGS. 19 and 20, the jaw flap 33 has a lower edge 33a, a front edge 33b and an upper edge 33c, wherein the front edge 33b extends between the lower edge 33a and the upper edge 33c. The upper edge 33c is inclined or angled upward along its length from the front edge 33b. An inner boundary 33d of the jaw flap 33 (see FIGS. 19 and 20) represents the region where the jaw flap 33 extends from the ear flap 32. The crown 39 of shell 31 may be provided with at least one, and preferably a plurality of ventilation openings, or air vents, 62, which permits the passage of air through shell 31. Vents 62 permit air adjacent the head 45 of wearer 46, which has been heated by being in contact with head 45, to be vented and passed outwardly through openings 62, which may contribute to greater comfort being afforded the wearer 46 of helmet 30. As shown in FIGS. 1, 1A, 13, 19 and 20, the shell 31 includes a raised central band 63 extending across the crown region 39 to the rear region 40. The band 63 may commence near the front region 41 and then extend across the crown region 39 to the rear region 40 of the shell 31. The band 63 has a width defined by a pair of opposed sidewalls 63a that extend outward or transversely from the outer surface of the shell 31 (see FIGS. 13 and 19). Preferably, the width of the band 63 increases as it extends across the crown region 39 to the rear region 40. The band 63 also has opposed lower side portions 63b, wherein each side portion 63b extends from the rear region 40 to a lower portion of the ear flap 32 and terminates proximate the ear opening 112 (see FIG. 19). As shown in FIGS. 19 and 20, the shell 31 includes a first plurality of vent openings 62 aligned along a first side of the raised central band, and a second plurality of vent openings 62 aligned along a second side of the raised central band. As shown in FIG. 12, the lower edge 42 of the shell 31 defines a circumference, and the shell 31 is configured such that the terminal ends of the jaw flaps 33 reside in the same or single quadrant of an X-Y coordinate system.

With reference to FIGS. 1, 1A, 8, and 15, the face guard connector 35 of the present invention will be described in greater detail. Face guard 65 is formed of a plurality of wire members 66, which may be formed of any suitable material having the requisite strength and durability characteristics to function as a football helmet face guard, as is known in the art. The wire members 66 may be preferably formed of a metallic material, such as any suitable steel, and as is known in the art, the wire members 66 may be provided with a suitable plastic coating. Additionally, the wire members 66 may be of a solid or tubular cross-sectional configuration. Alternatively, wire members 66 may be formed of any suitable plastic material, this material also having the requisite strength and durability characteristics to perform the functions of a football helmet face guard. The face guard connectors 35 are adapted to connect a portion of the face



guard 65 to shell 31. A face guard connector 35 is disposed on each side 43, 44 of shell 31. One embodiment of face guard connector 35 is shown in FIGS. 1, 1A and 8, while another embodiment of face guard connector is illustrated in FIGS. 15 and 17. In general, the two embodiments of face guard connector 35 are substantially similar, whereby the same components will be described with identical reference numerals, and primed reference numerals will be used in connection with components having the same, or similar functions, but different structures or configurations.

The details of the face guard connector 35 used in connection with the helmet 30 of FIGS. 1, 1A, 2 and 8, are illustrated in FIGS. 3 and 4, whereas the details of construction of the face guard connector 35 of FIG. 15 is illustrated in FIGS. 15 and 17. With reference to FIGS. 3, 4, 8, and 15, face guard connector 35 of the present invention is shown to include a shock absorber member 67 adapted to substantially omnidirectionally distribute an impact force, exerted upon the face guard 65, through shell 31. Preferably, each shock absorber member 67 is a grommet 68 disposed in an opening 69 formed in a side 43, 44 of shell 31. Grommet 68 may be formed of rubber, or any other suitable elastomeric material which will function so as to permit substantially omnidirectionally distribution of an impact force, exerted upon the face guard 65, throughout shell 31 of helmet 30. Preferably, grommet 68 is formed of synthetic rubber. In this regard, face guard 65 can incur impact forces in a variety of directions during a game of football. For example, as a player strikes the ground upon being tackled, his or her face guard might strike the ground at the lower most center 70 (FIG. 1) of face guard 65, which would be an upwardly exerted force upon face guard 65. Similarly, another player's helmet, or hand, might push downwardly upon the wire member 71 (FIG. 1) of face guard 65, thus exerting a downwardly extending impact force upon face guard 65. Additionally, a player's face guard could be struck in the direction from one of the sides 43, 44 of helmet 30, which would be a side or lateral impact force being exerted upon face guard 65. Of course, it would be readily apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art that an impact force could be exerted upon face guard 65 from any direction in which it is possible to strike, or impact against, face guard 65. As will be hereinafter described in greater detail, as an impact force is exerted upon face guard 65, the shock absorber member 67, or grommet 68, functions to absorb, or attenuate, the impact force exerted upon the face guard, and to substantially omnidirectionally distribute the impact force through the shell 31.

Grommet 68 may be a circular shaped member 72 with an opening 73 passing there through. As seen in FIG. 3, each circular shaped member 72 may include an inner, annular, or circular shaped lip 74 that abuts the inner wall surface 37 of the shell 31, and outer, annular shaped lip 75 that abuts the outer wall surface 38 of the shell 31. Each of the face guard connectors 35 has a recess 76 (FIG. 4) which receives a portion of the grommet 68 in a close fitting, abutting relationship as seen in FIG. 3. Preferably, the outer, annular shaped lip 75 is received in the recess 76. As shown in FIGS. 3, 8, and 15, a bushing 77 maybe disposed within the opening 73 which passes through grommet 68. Preferably, the bushing is made of a suitable plastic material having the requisite strength and durability characteristics to function as part of a football helmet face guard connector. Preferably, bushing 77 is formed of a thermoplastic material, such as SURLYN®. Bushing 77 may include a cap member 78 having an upper wall surface 79 (FIG. 3) and a lower wall surface 80 (FIGS. 8 and 15), with the lower wall surface 80

being disposed adjacent the inner wall surface 37 of the shell 31. A bolt 82 having first and second ends 83, 84 may be passed through each bushing and the face guard connector body members, or clips, 85, 85' of each face guard connector 35. A nut 86 receives the second end 84 of the bolt 82.

By bolt 82 being rotatably threaded and rotated with respect to nut 86, face guard 65 may be secured to each side 43, 44 of shell 31. It should be noted that although bolt 82 is inserted from the outside of shell 31, its disposition could be reversed, although it is preferred to be inserted from outside the shell, for ease of removal should a player be injured and it becomes necessary to remove face guard 65. The upper wall surface 79 of each cap member 78 may include a recess 87 which receives a corresponding nut 86. The recess 87 of the cap member 78 preferably matingly receives the corresponding nut 86 and the recess 87 restricts rotational movement of the nut with respect to the shell 31. Preferably, the nut 86 is a I-nut 88, which includes an upper rectangular shaped member 89 and a threaded cylindrical member 90 which is received and disposed within bushing 77.

Each of the face guard connectors 35 of the present invention include a face guard connector body member 85, 85'. With reference to FIGS. 3, 4, and 8, face guard connector body member 85 will be described. Face guard connector 85 has an inner surface, or inner wall surface, 91, and outer surface, or outer wall surface, 92. Each face guard connector body member 85 has at least two channels 93, 94, disposed in a substantially parallel, substantially non-colinear relationship, each channel 93, 94 receiving a portion of the face guard 65. Preferably, face guard 65 on both of its sides includes a plurality of wire members having a substantial rectangular shaped opening, such as is formed by wire members 66a, 66b, 66c and 66d as shown in FIG. 8, with wire members 66b and 66d being received within channels 93, 94, respectively. Preferably, at least one of the channels 93, 94, is formed in the inner surface 91 of the face guard connector body member 85 and the wire member 66b, 66d is received within the at least one channel, whereby the wire member 66b, 66d, is disposed between the inner surface 91 of the face guard connector body member 85, and the outer wall surface 38 of shell 31. Preferably, as shown in FIGS. 3 and 8, both channels, 93, 94 are formed in the inner surface 91 of the face guard connector body member 85. Face guard connector body member 85, as well as face guard connector body member 85', to be hereinafter described, may be made of any suitable material having the requisite strength and durability characteristic to function as part of a face guard connector, such as a thermoplastic material being preferred. An opening 95 may be formed in the face guard connector body member 85 to provide flexibility to body member 85 so that it can more readily conform to the outer contour of the shell 31.

With reference to FIGS. 15 and 17, it is seen that face guard body member 85' is similar in design to that of body member 85. Body member 85' differs from that of body member 85, in that body member 85' includes an access passageway 96 formed in the outer surface 92' of body member 85'. Access passageway 96 is aligned with an inflation port 97 disposed in shell 31, and is adapted to provide access to inflation port 97 and permit the shock absorbing liner, to be hereinafter described, to be inflated. Access passageway may be a semi-circular shaped notch 98 formed at one end of body member 85'.

Helmet 30 as seen in FIGS. 1 and 1A may be provided with conventional face guard clips 99, only one of which is illustrated in FIGS. 1 and 1A, which are used to secure the



upper portion 65a of face guard 65 to a face guard connection component 410 of the front 41 of shell 31. The details of construction of face guard clips 99 are shown in FIGS. 5 and 6. Upon the removal of bolts 82 from face guard connectors 35 and the removal of face guard connector body members 85, 85', face guard 65 may be rotated upwardly about face guard clips 99, in the event that it is necessary to gain access to the face of a player, or to better assist in removing the helmet 30 of a player. In this regard, no tools, other than a screw driver are necessary to remove bolts 82 and face guard connector body members 85, 85'. The frictional forces between bushing 77 and nut 86 restrain nut 86 from rotation while bolt 82 is being unthreaded there from.

Although the face guard connector 35 of the present invention has been described in particular with respect to its use with a football helmet 30, it should be noted that face guard connector 35 could, and in particular, its shock absorber member 67 could be utilized in connection with other types of protective helmets. For example, other types of helmets, with which a face guard of some type is used, include for example, lacrosse helmets, hockey helmets, and baseball batter's helmets, among others.

With reference to FIGS. 1 and 1A, each helmet includes a chin protector connector 34 for connecting a portion of a chin protector 100 to shell 31. Chin protector 100 may be of conventional design and has two sides 101, 102 and at least two flexible members 103, 104 associated with each side 101, 102 of the chin protector. Only flexible members 103, 104, associated with side 102 of chin protector 100 are illustrated. The at least two flexible members, or strap members, 103, 104 are adapted to engage with one of the chin protector connectors 34 on the sides 43, 44 of shell 31. Chin protector 100 may include a conventional chin cup 105 as is known in the art. Two embodiments of chin protector connectors 34, in accordance with the present invention, are shown in FIGS. 1 and 1A.

With respect to FIGS. 1A, 1B, 15, and 19, chin protector connector 34 includes at least two notches 107, 108 (FIG. 19) formed in the lower edge surface 42 of shell 31, with at least one notch being disposed on each side 43, 44 of the shell 31. As shown in FIGS. 1A and 1B, at least one of the flexible members 103, 104 on each side of the chin protector 100 passes through at least one 107 of the notches 107, 108 on each side 43, 44 of the shell 31. Preferably, only one notch is formed in the shell 31 on each side 43, 44 of the shell; however, if desired, additional notches could be formed on the sides of the shell. Preferably, notches 107, 108 are generally V-shaped notches; however, other shapes of notches, if desired, could be utilized. As shown in FIGS. 1A and 1B, flexible member, or flexible strap member 104 passes through notch 107. As is known in the art, chin protector 100 has upper and lower flexible members 103, 104, on each side, and the upper flexible members, or flexible strap members 103 are releasably secured to the shell 31 as by a conventional snap connector, the male portion of the snap 109 (FIGS. 15 and 19), cooperating with a female snap connector 110 carried by a bracket 111 mounted on upper strap 103 (FIG. 1A).

Helmets 30 are each provided with an ear opening 112 in each ear flap 32, and the ear openings 112 are adapted to be disposed adjacent an ear 50 of the wearer 46 permit the transmission of sound to the wearer 46. Ear openings 112 may be provided with a generally rounded configuration, with ear openings 112 generally having a truncated triangular shaped configuration with an additional smaller opening 112' being disposed rearwardly of the main ear opening 112. Preferably the notches 107, 108 are disposed in the lower

edge surface 42 of the shell 31, and as seen in FIG. 19, and the notches 107, 108 are preferably disposed substantially, directly below the ear openings 112. As seen in FIGS. 1A and 1B, a first portion 115 of each lower flexible member 104 is disposed adjacent the inner wall surface 37 of shell 31, a second portion 116 of strap member 104 passes through notch 107, and a third portion 117 of the flexible member, or lower strap member 104 is disposed adjacent the outer wall surface 38 of shell 31. The third portion 117 of each lower strap member 104 is preferably releasably secured to a portion of the chin protector connector 34 disposed on the outer wall surface 38 of shell 31. Preferably, strap 104 is releasably secured by a male and female snap connector 109, 110, and bracket 111, as previously described. The foregoing described chin protector 100 is generally referred to as a 4 point hookup, or a "high hookup" chin protector, or chin strap, which is believed to provide better stability of the helmet 30 with respect to the wearer's head, particularly upon the player sustaining an impact force to helmet 30.

Because as previously described, the ear flaps 32 of the present invention are generally disposed to lie in a plane which is substantially parallel to the longitudinal axis 61 of the outer shell 31, the notches 107, 108 of chin protector connector 34 serve to provide improved stability of the lower chin straps, or flexible members 104, by preventing the lower strap 104 from being free to slide around the outer wall surface of ear flaps 32. The notches 107, 108 are believed to effectively "catch" the lower strap member 104 to prevent the free sliding of the lower chin strap 104. In general, if a helmet 30 is subjected to a downward impact force upon face mask 65, helmet 30 tends to roll forwardly around a virtual pivot point located slightly above the ear openings 112. This rolling effect is typically resisted by a force acting between the lower strap connectors 109, 110 and the chin 49 of the wearer of the helmet. The further away from the virtual pivot point the lower snap connection of lower chin strap 104 is located, the better the resistance of the helmet 30 to rolling. Notch 107 assists in resisting the undesired rolling effect by redirecting the strap's force line of action to a location farther away from the virtual pivot point.

With reference to FIGS. 1 and 2 and 7, another embodiment of the chin protector connector 34 of the present invention will be described. In this embodiment, chin protector connector 34, at least one slot 120 is formed in each side 43, 44 of shell 31, and at least one of the flexible members 103, 104, passes through the at least one slot 120. Preferably, the at least one slot 120 is formed in each side 43, 44 of shell 31, and the at least one slot 120 is disposed in each ear flap 32 of shell 31. Preferably, only one slot 120 is provided for each side of the shell 31. Additionally, the at least one slot 120 is preferably disposed forwardly of each ear opening 112 and is positioned between the front 41 of the shell and each ear opening 112. As shown in FIG. 7, slot 120 is tapered with respect to the inner and outer wall surfaces 37, 38 of the shell, whereby sharp edges are avoided which could damage flexible member or strap member, 104. Strap member 104 is also releasably secured to shell 31 as by use by a female and male snap connector and bracket 109-111, as previously described. Upon releasing the lower snap connections associated with lower strap members 104, the chin protector 104 may be loosened with respect to the chin of the wearer of the helmet, whereby the wearer of the helmet may remove helmet 30 from his or her head. It is not necessary to disengage, or unstrap, the upper flexible strap members 103, in order to remove helmet 30.



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Helmets **30** of the present invention preferably include a shock absorbing liner **125** associated by the liner connector with the inner wall surface **37** of shell **31**. Preferably, the shock absorbing liner **125** is releasably connected to the inner wall surface **37** of shell **31** by the liner connector. Preferably the liner connector includes a hook and loop fastener assembly, which is generally referred to as a VELCRO® attachment, as by placing portions of the hook and loop assembly on the shock absorbing liner **125** and the inner wall surface **37** of the shell **31**, as is known in the art.

As shown in FIGS. **14** and **16**, shock absorbing liner **125** generally includes a plurality of resilient members **130** which are adapted to absorb shock forces exerted upon the shell **31**, and the plurality of resilient members **130** are disposed along the inner wall surface **37** of the back **40** and sides **43**, **44** of shell **31**. The general construction of shock absorbing liner **125** is disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 5,263,203, commonly assigned with the present application, and which patent is herein incorporated by reference. Shock absorbing liners **125**, **125'** may each include an inflation valve **131** which would mate with an opening, or port, disposed in the rear **40** of the shell **31**, whereby shock absorbing liners **125**, **125'** could be inflated as desired. Shock absorbing liners **125**, **125'** each include at least one resilient pad member **135** disposed upon the inner wall surface **136** of a portion of each of the jaw flap **33** of shell **31**. Two embodiments of resilient pad members **135** are illustrated. The first embodiment of resilient pad member **135** is shown in FIGS. **1**, **1A**, **2**, **8**, **12**, and **14**. Another embodiment of resilient pad member **135** is illustrated in FIGS. **15** and **16**. Although the at least one resilient pad member, or jaw pad, **135** could be formed integral with the plurality of resilient pad members **130** of shock absorbing liners **125**, **125'**, the resilient pad members **135** are preferably releasably secured to the plurality of resilient members **130** forming shock absorbing liner **125**. As seen in FIGS. **14** and **16** each of the shock absorbing liners **125**, **125'** have first and second ends **140**, **141**, and the shock absorbing liners **125**, **125'** have a connector member **145**, **145'** disposed at each of the ends **140**, **141**. Each of the connector members **145**, **145'** are adapted to connect to the shock absorbing liner **125**, **125'** at least one of the resilient pad members **135** disposed upon the inner wall surface **136** of a portion of the jaw flap **33**.

As shown in FIGS. **8** and **14**, one embodiment of the at least one resilient pad member **135**, may be jaw pad **150**. Another embodiment of the at least one resilient pad member **135** may be seen in FIGS. **15** and **16** as jaw pad **150'**. Each of the resilient pad members **135**, or jaw pads **150**, **150'** include at least one, and preferably three resilient pad members **151**, **152**, **153**, in the case of the embodiment of jaw pad **150**, and two resilient pad members **151'** and **152'** in the embodiment of resilient pad member **135**, or jaw pad **150'** of FIG. **16**. As previously described, each of the resilient pad members **135**, or jaw pads **150**, **150'**, are releasably secured to the resilient members **130** of the shock absorbing liners **125**, **125'** by a connector member **145**, **145'**. Preferably the connector member **145**, **145'** is a sling **160**, **160'**, that suspends at least at least one of the resilient pad members that comprise jaw pads **150**, **150'**. For example, as shown in FIGS. **1A**, **8** and **14**, resilient pad member **151** is suspended from sling **160**. Similarly, as shown in FIGS. **15** and **16**, resilient pad member **151'** of jaw pad **150'** is suspended from sling **160**. Sling **160** has an opening **161** that receives the outer configuration, or periphery, of resilient pad member **151** therein, preferably in a closely conforming or mating, snug fitting relationship. Similarly, sling **160'** has an opening **161'** which receives the outer periphery of

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resilient pad member **151'** of jaw pad **150'**, again in preferably a mating, snug fitting relationship. It should be noted that since each of the jaw pads **150**, **150'** also include some hook and loop fastener material such as VELCRO®, **162**, **163** (FIG. **8**) and **162'**, **163'** (FIG. **15**), to releasably secure jaw pads **150**, **150'** to the inner wall surface **37** of shell **31**, and preferably to the inner wall surface **136** of a portion of the jaw flap **33** of the shell **31**, the mating relationship between the resilient pad members **151**, **151'** with openings **161**, **161'** is not required to be a snug, frictional relationship. It may rather be a loose fitting relationship for positioning purposes only, to position the jaw pads **150**, **150'** in their desired location. With the hook and loop fastener material **162**, **163** and **162'** and **163'** acting to releasably secure the jaw pads **150**, **150'**.

With reference to FIGS. **12** and **14**, when shock absorbing liner **125** is associated with the inner wall surface **37** of shell **31**, including the at least one resilient pad member **135**, or jaw pad **150** being associated with shock absorbing liner **125**, an ear channel **170** is formed on each side of the shell **31** between at least one of the resilient members **130** of the shock absorbing liner **125** and at least one resilient pad member **135**, or jaw pad **150**. Each ear channel **170** is disposed adjacent the ear openings **112** formed in ear flaps **32**. For example, with reference to FIGS. **12** and **14**, ear channel **170** is formed and bounded by on one side, by resilient member **130a**, and on the other side by resilient pad members **151** and **152**. The upper end of ear channel **170**, as illustrated, is bounded by resilient member **130b**. Similarly, as seen in FIG. **16**, ear channel **170** is bounded by resilient member **130a** on one side, and by resilient pad members **151'** and **152'** on the other side. The top of the ear channel **170** may be bounded by resilient member **130b'**. Each of the ear channels **170** preferably extends along an axis **171** which is disposed substantially parallel with the substantially vertical, longitudinal axis **61** of the shell **31** extending from the crown **39** of the shell **31** to the lower edge surface **42** of the shell **31** adjacent the ear flap **32**. The ear channels **170** are thus substantially unobstructed from the ear opening **112** to the lower edge surface **42** of the shell **31** below the ear openings **112**, whereby the wearer of the helmet may easily put on, or take off, the helmet **30** without substantial contact between the ear of the wearer and the resilient members **130** and resilient pad members **135** of the shock absorbing liners **125**, **125'**. It is believed that ear channels **170** will help prevent and/or minimize irritation to the player's ear.

With reference to FIGS. **8-11**, the details of construction of jaw pad **150** are illustrated. In general, the resilient pad member **135**, or pads **151**, **152**, **153**, may include a layer of padding material **175**, or two layers of padding material **176**, **177** disposed in a chamber, or housing, **178**, **179**, **180**. The chambers **178-180** may be formed of any suitable plastic material having the requisite strength and durability characteristics, as is known in the art, to function as resilient members, or pad members, for a football helmet. If desired, all of the chambers **178-180** could be filled with a single layer of padding material, or some of the chambers could be filled with a single layer, and other chambers could be filled with two or more layers of padding material. Alternatively, at least one of the resilient pad members **135**, or pads **151-153** could also include a fluid such as a pressurized fluid, such as air. In the embodiment of jaw pad **150** shown in FIGS. **8-11**, pads **151** and **153** are filled with a single layer of padding material, and pad **152** in addition to at least one layer **176** of padding material includes a fluid, and the fluid may be pressurized. Preferably, the fluid is air. As shown in FIG. **9**, pad **152** preferably includes within its respective



housing, or chamber, **179**, two layers of padding material, **176**, **177**. A variety of different padding materials can be used for layers **175-177**. For example, PVC nitrile foam, rubber foam, or polyurethane foam are examples of foam padding materials which may be utilized, as are known in the art. When multiple layers of padding material are utilized, such as in pad **152**, the first layer of **176** may be one of the foregoing types of foam materials, which is generally referred to as an energy, or force attenuating, foam, and the second layer of foam padding material **177** is a "softer" foam, generally referred to as a fitting, or comfort, foam, as is known in the art. Examples of materials in construction of the foregoing described pads may also be found in U.S. Pat. No. 3,882,547, which is also commonly assigned to the present assignee of this application, which patent is incorporated herein by reference. The pressurized fluid, or air, may be provided to the interior of chamber, or housing, **179**, as by an air channel **181** in fluid communication with the interior of housing **179** at one end, and in fluid communication at its other end with a suitable inflation valve **182**. Inflation valve **182** may include an inlet orifice **183** which permits access to a conventional, compressible needle valve member **184** which has an exit orifice **185** in fluid communication with air channel **181**. A conventional hand held pump having a conventional inflation needle may be inserted through the needle valve member **184**, as is known in the art, to provide the desired amount of pressurized fluid, or air into air channel **181**, to thus inflate chamber, or housing, **179**, as desired. The inflation of chamber **179**, in combination with the foam padding material contained therein may assist in properly sizing the helmet, including jaw pad **150**, to the shape of the head of the wearer of the helmet. Air channel **181** may be formed by any conventional plastic material formed in the shape of air channel **181**, such as by two layers of a suitable thermoplastic material which are heat sealed together into the configuration shown in FIGS. **9** and **11**. Inflation valve **182** may include an annular seat **186** which is received within the confines of opening **187** when inflation valve **182** is folded back upon jaw pad **150** after pad **152** has been inflated, as desired, as shown in FIG. **14**.

With reference to FIGS. **15** and **16**, jaw pad **150'** may be similar in construction to jaw pad **150**. Pad **151'** may also include a chamber **178'** which may include a single, solid layer of foam **175'**, and the pad **152'** may, if desired, have multiple of layers of foam disposed within chamber, or housing **179'**. If it is desired to provide for a fluid within chamber **179'**, pad **150'** may also include an inflation valve **182** as previously described, in fluid communication with an air channel **181'**, which in turn is in fluid communication with the interior of chamber **179'**. As shown in FIG. **15**, inflation valve **182** for pad **150'** is associated with an inflation port **97**, disposed in the outer wall surface **38** of shell **31**, inflation port **97** in turn passing through the shell **31** to the inner wall surface **37** of shell **31**. Thus, the inflation valve **182** of jaw pad **150'** is accessible from the exterior of shell **31**, whereas inflation valve **182** of pad **150** is accessible from within shell **31**. Chamber, or housing, **179** for pad **152'** of jaw pad **150'** may have any suitable outer configuration; however, a generally polygonal configuration as illustrated in FIG. **16**. The two outer wall surfaces **190**, **191** of chamber **179'**, which define one side of ear channel **170** are of a generally rounded shape, with no sharp protrusions extending into ear channel **170**. Housing, or chamber **179'** of jaw pad **150'** may have at least three sides, five sides being illustrated in the embodiment of FIGS. **15** and **16**. It should be readily apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art that jaw

pad **150'** may have more than three sides, as well as could have only an outer circumference, were it to be formed in the shape of a circle.

With reference to FIGS. **12** and **13**, a crown shock absorbing pad **200** is preferably disposed adjacent the inner wall surface **37** of shell **31** beneath crown **39**. Preferably, crown shock absorbing pad **200** is inflatable, and includes an inflation valve **201** which is received within an opening (not shown) formed in the crown **39** of shell **31**, which permits crown shock absorbing pad **200** to be inflated. Crown **200** may also include a positioning member **202**, or snap member **203**, or push-in-plug **204** which is received within an opening **205** in shell **31**, to position and retain crown pad **200** within shell **31**. Crown shock absorbing pad **200** may be of any suitable construction, and may include a single or multiple layers of a suitable shock absorbing foam material disposed therein. As seen in FIG. **12**, the front **41** of shell **31** may include a conventional brow pad **210**, as is known in the art.

As seen in FIGS. **8**, **14-17**, and **19**, the helmets **30** of the present invention, including jaw pads **150**, **150'**, when compared with previously proposed helmets, provide for a substantial amount of energy, or force attenuating, foam, or padding material, disposed in front of the coronal plane of the body of the wearer of the helmet and below the basic plane of the head of the wearer of the helmet. The energy, or force attenuating, foam, or padding material, is preferably a PVC nitrile foam or a polyurethane foam, having a density of at least approximately 5 PCF (pounds per cubic foot) and at least approximately a 25% compression deflection (ASTM D-1056 standard) of 8 PSI (pounds per square inch). As is known to those of skill in this art, the coronal plane is the frontal plane that passes through the long, or longitudinal, axis of the body, and the basic plane is a transverse plane that generally passes through the ears and the lower orbital rims of the eyes of the body.

It is to be understood that the invention is not limited to the exact details of construction, operation, exact materials or embodiment shown and described, as obvious modifications and equivalents will be apparent to one skilled in the art. Accordingly, the invention is therefore to be limited only by the scope of the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A football helmet comprising:

a plastic shell configured to receive a head of a wearer of the helmet, the shell having:

a front region;  
a crown region;  
a rear region;

two side regions wherein each side region has an ear flap with an ear opening;

a raised central band integrally formed as part of the shell and extending across the crown region;

a first plurality of elongated vent openings formed in the shell outside of the raised central band, wherein the first plurality of vent openings are aligned, and positioned along a first side of the raised central band; and

a second plurality of elongated vent openings formed in the shell outside of the raised central band, wherein the second plurality of vent openings are aligned, and positioned along a second side of the raised central band.

2. The football helmet of claim 1, wherein the raised central band has a width defined by a pair of opposed side walls that extend transversely from an outer surface of the shell.



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3. The football helmet of claim 2, wherein the side wall has a curvilinear configuration as it extends across the crown region.

4. The football helmet of claim 2, wherein the first plurality of vent openings are positioned adjacent to one of the pair of side walls.

5. The football helmet of claim 4, wherein the second plurality of vent openings are positioned adjacent to the other of the pair of side walls.

6. The football helmet of claim 1, wherein the raised central band extends from the crown region to the rear region of the shell.

7. The football helmet of claim 6, wherein the raised central band has a width defined by a pair of opposed sidewalls that extend transversely from an outer surface of the shell, and wherein the side wall has a curvilinear configuration as it extends across the crown region to the rear region of the shell.

8. The football helmet of claim 1, wherein at least one vent opening in the first plurality of vent openings is positioned in the crown region of the shell, and wherein at least one vent opening in the second plurality of vent openings is positioned in the crown region.

9. The football helmet of claim 1, wherein a first vent opening in the first plurality of vent openings is laterally aligned with a first vent opening in the second plurality of vent openings.

10. The football helmet of claim 9, wherein a second vent opening in the first plurality of vent openings is laterally aligned with a second vent opening in the second plurality of vent openings.

11. The football helmet of claim 1, further comprising an integral jaw flap that extends forward from the ear flap, wherein the front edge of the jaw flap is positioned both in front of a coronal plane and below a basic plane of the head of a wearer of the helmet.

12. The football helmet of claim 11, wherein each jaw flap has a bottom edge, a substantially linear front edge and a top edge that is inclined from the front edge, and wherein the front edge and the top edge of the jaw flap define an obtuse angle.

13. The football helmet of claim 11, further comprising a jaw pad removably attached to an inner surface of the jaw flap, wherein the jaw pad has a force attenuating layer, the force attenuating layer having a density of at least 5 pounds per cubic foot and at least a 25% compression deflection of 8 pounds per square inch per the ASTM D-1056 standard.

14. The football helmet of claim 1, wherein at least one vent opening in the first plurality of vent openings is positioned in the crown region of the shell.

15. The football helmet of claim 14, wherein at least one vent opening in the first plurality of vent openings is positioned in the rear region of the shell.

16. The football helmet of claim 1, wherein the raised central band extends from the front portion of the shell across the crown region.

17. The football helmet of claim 16, wherein a first vent opening in the first plurality of vent openings is positioned a first distance from a frontal edge of the front region of the shell, and a first vent opening in the second plurality of vent openings is positioned a second distance from the frontal edge, and wherein the first distance and the second distance are equal.

18. The football helmet of claim 1, wherein the raised central band lacks any vent openings.

19. The football helmet of claim 1, wherein the first plurality of vent openings have an elongated configuration.

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20. A football helmet comprising:  
a one-piece shell configured to receive a head of a wearer of the helmet, the shell having:

a front region;

a crown region;

a rear region;

two side regions wherein each side region has an ear flap with an ear opening;

a raised central band integrally formed as part of the shell and extending across the crown region to the rear region, the raised central band having a width defined by a pair of opposed side walls that extend transversely from an outer surface of the shell, wherein a front extent of the opposed side walls do not converge;

a first plurality of elongated vent openings formed in the shell outside of the raised central band, wherein the first plurality of elongated vent openings are substantially aligned along a first side wall of the raised central band;

a second plurality of elongated vent openings formed in the shell outside of the raised central band, wherein the second plurality of elongated vent openings are substantially aligned along a second side wall of the raised central band; and, a face guard secured to the shell by a plurality of connectors.

21. The football helmet of claim 20, wherein the raised central band lacks any vent openings.

22. The football helmet of claim 20, wherein the front region has at least one face guard connector and each ear flap has a face guard connector, and wherein a face guard is secured to the shell by the face guard connectors.

23. The football helmet of claim 20, wherein the shell has a frontal face guard connection component for securement of an upper, frontal portion of the face guard, wherein the first and second plurality of vent openings include a first vent opening, and wherein the distance between an outer edge of the first vent openings exceeds a width of the frontal face guard connection component.

24. The football helmet of claim 20, wherein the shell has a frontal face guard connection component for securement of an upper, frontal portion of the face guard, wherein a first vent opening in the first plurality of vent openings is positioned a first distance from the face guard connection component and a first vent opening in the second plurality of vent openings is positioned a second distance from the face guard connection component, and wherein the first distance and the second distance are equal.

25. The football helmet of claim 20, wherein the shell has a frontal face guard connection component for securement of an upper, frontal portion of the face guard, the frontal face guard connection component defining a height and a width, and wherein the first and second plurality of vent openings each include a first vent opening, and wherein the distance between outer edges of the first vent openings exceeds the width of the frontal face guard connection component.

26. The football helmet of claim 20, wherein an end portion of the first side wall extends transversely away from the raised central band.

27. The football helmet of claim 20, further comprising a chin strap assembly that releasably secures the helmet to the wearer.

28. The football helmet of claim 27, wherein each ear flap has upper and lower chin strap connectors affixed to the shell, wherein each ear flap has first and second ear openings positioned between the chin strap connectors, wherein the first ear opening is positioned in front of the second ear



opening, wherein the first ear opening has a perimeter that exceeds a perimeter of the second ear opening.

**29.** A football helmet comprising:

a one-piece shell configured to receive a head of a wearer of the football helmet, the shell having:

a front region;

a crown region;

a rear region;

two side regions wherein each side region has an ear flap with an ear opening;

a raised central band integrally formed as part of the shell and extending across the crown region to the rear region, the raised central band including a first side wall and a second side wall, said side walls extending outwardly from an outer surface of the shell;

a first plurality of elongated vent openings formed in the shell outside of the raised central band, wherein the first plurality of elongated vent openings are positioned adjacent to the first side wall of the raised central band;

a second plurality of elongated vent openings formed in the shell outside of the raised central band, wherein the second plurality of elongated vent openings are positioned adjacent to the second side wall of the raised central band;

a face guard connection component affixed to the front region of the shell;

a face guard secured to the shell by the face guard connection component; and,

wherein the first and second plurality of vent openings include a first vent opening, and wherein the distance between an outer edge of the first vent openings exceeds a width of the face guard connection component.

**30.** The football helmet of claim **29**, wherein the first side wall and the second side wall each have a front extent, and said front extents do not converge.

**31.** The football helmet of claim **30**, wherein the raised central band lacks any vent openings.

**32.** The football helmet of claim **29**, wherein (i) a vent in the first plurality of elongated vent openings has a length, said the length is substantially parallel to an extent of the first sidewall and (ii) a vent in the second plurality of elongated vent openings has a length, said the length is substantially parallel to an extent of the second sidewall.

**33.** The football helmet of claim **29**, further comprising:

a first inflation opening formed in the shell and positioned within the raised central band;

a second inflation opening formed in the shell and positioned within the raised central band; and,

a connector opening formed in the shell and positioned within the raised central band.

**34.** The football helmet of claim **33**, further comprising an internal pad assembly removably joined to an internal surface of the shell, said internal pad assembly having:

(i) an inflatable crown pad assembly, said inflatable crown pad assembly including an inflation valve and connector, wherein the inflation valve of the crown pad is aligned with the first inflation opening and the connector is aligned with the connector opening; and

(ii) inflatable rear pad assembly, said inflatable rear pad assembly including an inflation valve, wherein the inflation valve of the rear pad is aligned with the second inflation opening.

**35.** The football helmet of claim **34**, wherein the first inflation opening, second inflation opening, and connector opening are aligned with each other in the raised central band.

**36.** The football helmet of claim **34**, wherein an extent of the inflatable crown pad assembly resides within the raised central band and against an inner surface of the shell.

**37.** A football helmet comprising:

a one-piece shell configured to receive a head of a wearer of the football helmet, the shell having:

a front region;

a crown region;

a rear region;

two side regions wherein each side region has an ear flap with a non-circular ear opening;

a raised central band integrally formed as part of the shell and extending across the crown region to the rear region, the raised central band having a first side wall and a second side wall, wherein:

(i) said side walls extend outwardly from an outer surface of the shell, and

(ii) a front extent of the first and second side walls do not converge;

a first plurality of non-circular vent openings formed in the shell external to the raised central band, wherein the first plurality of non-circular vent openings are positioned adjacent to the first side wall of the raised central band; and

a second plurality of non-circular vent openings formed in the shell external to the raised central band, wherein the second plurality of non-circular vent openings are positioned adjacent to the second side wall of the raised central band.

**38.** The football helmet of claim **37**, further comprising: a face guard connection component affixed to the front region of the shell;

a face guard secured to the shell by the face guard connection component;

wherein the first and second plurality of non-circular vent openings each include a vent opening, and wherein the distance between an outer edge of said vent openings defines a vent opening width that exceeds a width of the face guard connection component.

**39.** The football helmet of claim **37**, further comprising: a first inflation opening formed in the shell and positioned within the raised central band;

a second inflation opening formed in the shell and positioned within the raised central band; and,

a connector opening formed in the shell and positioned within the raised central band.

**40.** The football helmet of claim **39**, further comprising an internal pad assembly removably joined to an internal surface of the shell, said internal pad assembly having:

(i) an inflatable crown pad assembly, said inflatable crown pad assembly including an inflation valve and connector, wherein the inflation valve of the crown pad is aligned with the first inflation opening and the connector is aligned with the connector opening; and

(ii) inflatable rear pad assembly, said inflatable rear pad assembly including an inflation valve, wherein the inflation valve of the rear pad is aligned with the second inflation opening.

**41.** The football helmet of claim **40**, wherein the first inflation opening, second inflation opening, and connector opening are aligned with each other in the raised central band.

42. The football helmet of claim 40, wherein an extent of the inflatable crown pad assembly resides within the raised central band and against an inner surface of the shell.

43. The football helmet of claim 37, wherein the raised central band lacks any vent openings.

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